

## AZERBAIJAN: ETHNOPOLITICAL SECURITY IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 21ST CENTURY

**Kenan Allahverdiev**, Ph.D. (Philos.), Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science and Political Administration, Academy of State Administration under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Baku, Azerbaijan)

### Introduction

I would like to say from the very beginning that any, even hypothetical, consideration of a conflict settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the focal point of the Caucasian instability salient, would be illogical without taking into account the possible geopolitical shifts in the region and in each of its countries. This suggests the following:

- An analysis of the key factors of what is called the forecast background: the key trends of the initial and forestalling period in the history of the phenomenon being studied;
- Long-term forecasts of the prospects for ethno-political security of the Azerbaijan Republic based on the principles of scientific prognostication;
- A normative scenario of the country's development in the mid- and long-term perspectives based on the priorities of its ethno-political security strategy.

### The Forecast Background: Key Factors

Any political forecast, either of domestic or international developments, should follow certain principles (it should take account of possible alternatives, be verifiable, objective, etc.), thus serving as the starting point for the forecast proper. This is an all-important requirement and the hardest to obey. Scenarios can be described as the most widely used type of political forecasting based on the correct identification of critical points in any political entity, the quantitative impact on which might trigger irreversible qualitative changes.

To achieve this, we should single out the key factors of the forecast background. In our case, they are:

**First**, the factor of Caucasian geopolitics; much has already been written about the problem, however the target of the study remains somewhat vague. There is no Caucasian region (or even what is known as the Southern Caucasus) in the strict sense of the word. There are three states with different development vectors, different values, and different political mentalities. This means that the Caucasus is not a subject but an object of geopolitics and that global and regional powers, rather than the local states and their coordinated efforts, are behind the geopolitical changes there. This creates another problem, viz. the vague and inconsistent policies of the largest powers in the region and their attitude toward Azerbaijan. It is no exaggeration to say that Russia and the United States have not yet clarified their Caucasian policies.

**Second**, the factor of a successful national development model, which the region badly needs. It should harmonize, in the most natural and fundamental way, ethnic, national, and regional interests in all spheres of social life. Kamaludin Hajiev has written on this score that the Caucasus “is a knot of barely resolvable socioeconomic, national-territorial, confessional, geopolitical, and other interests. We should bear in mind that the new Transcaucasian states, just as the other post-Soviet countries, are facing the cardinally important problem of a quest for new ways of socioeconomic and sociopolitical development and their detailing.”<sup>1</sup>

The 2009 rating published by *International Living* magazine placed Azerbaijan ahead of its regional neighbors and the CIS partners in terms of economic growth rates.<sup>2</sup> Azerbaijan's heavier geopolitical and socioeconomic weight points to the direction the region will follow some time in the future.

**Third**, the military-political factor. There is a more or less widely accepted opinion that a full-scale war will mark the point of no return and destabilize the geopolitical situation in the Caucasus, the Greater Black Sea-Caspian Region, and even in the Middle East. Let's discuss this in greater detail. Numerous pessimists not merely predict this, they also supply exact dates. Putting minor differences aside, the following can be described as the key possibilities:

- (A) a war between the United States and its allies (Israel) and Iran;
- (B) a war between Russia and one of the Caucasian states;
- (C) a war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The media described the consequences of a war between the West and Iran, a potential nuclear power, as the “Iranian Armageddon”: Iran will respond with “retaliatory” strikes; the war will spread along its entire border;

<sup>1</sup> K.S. Gadjeiev, *Geopolitika Kavkaza, Mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia*, Moscow, 2003, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> [www.internationalliving.com]: [http://br.az/index.php?newsid=5056].

Color Revolutions will spring up in Tehran or in the north with its predominantly Azeri population; the state will fall apart into three parts; Iran might start a preventive war against Turkey and Azerbaijan.

The above will not be limited to purely military threats; Azerbaijan's ethnopolitical and national security will be upset by an uncontrolled inflow of millions of refugees from the conflict zones. The more or less similar developments of 1988-1992 when about 200 thousand Azeris fled Armenia provide a vague idea of the possible domestic destabilization in the Azerbaijan Republic caused by this new ethnopolitical factor. The scale of the Iranian humanitarian catastrophe will be quite a bit larger.

The hostilities of the summer of 2008 dissipated the last illusion nurtured by the Caucasian elites about Russia's willingness to interfere in their countries' domestic affairs and to use force. Today, however, for political and economic considerations, Russia will not go to war to expand its influence lest it strain its budget undermined by the world crisis and its international political status beyond endurance.

A war between Armenia and Azerbaijan will detonate the region. The Armenian media are fond of chewing over this possibility; some of the authors venture to give exact dates and directions of possible strikes; others call on the public to ignore the warnings coming from Azerbaijan as intended, it is argued, for domestic consumption. Regrettably, it must be admitted that the threat of war is very high in deed: many years of mediation to reach peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have so far failed.

Thomas de Waal, a prominent British Caucasian expert, said at the Conference on Settlement of the Karabakh Conflict: the Real and the Unreal that, no matter how small, there was the risk of another flare-up in the Karabakh zone. This could happen, said he, if the military and politicians decided to use the huge amounts of already accumulated weapons. Azerbaijan, dissatisfied with the status quo, would, sooner or later, do something to return its territories. The cease-fire regime is still in place, he went on to say, and added that he did not want to sound like an alarmist. The OSCE Minsk Group would be unable to prevent another round of hostilities: the status quo is comfortable, but can hardly last forever. Official Baku is prepared to talk, but never lets a military solution out of sight. International experts and structures, like the OSCE MG, should be involved, but they cannot operate on their own. "The European Union should be more actively involved in the settlement of the Karabakh conflict because, should it become aggravated, Europe will be compelled to participate in eliminating the consequences."<sup>3</sup> The Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community published by the U.S. Intelligence Service in January 2010 confirmed that the hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan could be resumed despite the improved relations between Turkey and Armenia, which, in turn, warmed up Armenian-Azeri relations to a certain extent and improved the climate around the Karabakh conflict.<sup>4</sup>

President Ilham Aliiev, likewise, is aware of the threat: Azerbaijan is resolved to achieve a peace settlement, yet "we cannot completely rule out the use of force. We have the right, based on international law, to restore our territorial integrity. None of the countries doubts this."<sup>5</sup> According to Eugene Chausovskiy, analyst for the Stratfor Global Intelligence Company, Azerbaijan could not start a war because of the negative response of its traditional allies, Turkey, the United States, and Europe; Russia, which regards Armenia as its military ally, might be inspired to engage in military combat.<sup>6</sup>

In Russia, G. Trofimchuk, an expert engaged in forecasting the possible moves of the great powers in the event of a new war in Karabakh, is convinced that Russia will remain neutral.<sup>7</sup> Another Russian military expert, Pavel Felgengauer (who made a name for himself by revealing before the 2008 August war that Russia was planning aggression against Georgia), does not exclude another war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>8</sup>

The above is most important for prognosticating Azerbaijan's ethnopolitical security and its possible scenarios.

## Scenario 1—

### "Federalization of the Azerbaijan Republic"

More or less noticeable progress in the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement is triggering talks about the state's federalization: this has developed into one of the most striking features of the peace process. Federation is a contradictory system which looks different in different countries. In the Soviet Union, it never developed into a viable principle, rather served as a starting point for ethnic conflicts and ethnic separatism. Autonomous statuses of all levels were distributed far and wide for various reasons, which created political and legal collisions.<sup>9</sup>

The Azerbaijanian S.S.R. had its share of autonomies—the Nakhchivan A.S.S.R. and the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region; the Constitution, meanwhile, described it as a unitary state. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenian occupation of Azeri lands created stable aversion to the federation principle among the national elite. Society has graduated to the awareness that "accepted as the basic one, the

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from: T. Maksutov, "Spiashchiiy Nagorno-karabakhskiy konflikt mozhet 'prosnutsia' v voennye deistviia," available at [[http://azeri.ppd.spb.ru/papers/echo-az\\_info/64256/](http://azeri.ppd.spb.ru/papers/echo-az_info/64256/)].

<sup>4</sup> See: D.C. Blair, "Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 12 February 2009," available at [<http://intelligence.senate.gov/090212flair.pdf>].

<sup>5</sup> [<http://www.apa.az/ru/news.php?id=139042>], 14 July, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> [<http://www.1news.az/interview/20100316110044330.html>].

<sup>7</sup> [<http://kavkasia.net/Azerbaijan/article/1268016965.php> 07/03/2010].

<sup>8</sup> [<http://kavkasia.net/World/2010/1268417590.php>.12/03/2010].

<sup>9</sup> A.I. Lepeshkin, "Mnogoobrazie vidov sovetskoy federatsii," *Pravovedenie*, No. 5, 1975, pp. 17-25.

national principle of a federation was wrong from the very beginning. It was rather a delayed action mine of cataclysms, separatism, and disintegration of states."<sup>10</sup>

A. Zakharov, a Russian student of federalism, has identified the following as one of the fundamental threats to the state's security and integrity: "the combination of ethnic and territorial principles and the constitutionally confirmed irreversible association between the ethnic group and the territory on which it lives. We have inherited this obsolete approach from Marxism. Today it is applied mainly in developing countries, such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, and India. The East European federations based on this principle (the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia) fell apart; there are doubts about the viability of the only new state based on the same principle—Bosnia and Herzegovina."<sup>11</sup>

The above explains why the idea of a federation for Azerbaijan is resolutely rejected at all the negotiation stages. Baku suggests discussing only "the widest possible autonomy within the unitary Azeri state." Dina Malysheva has pointed out that "if the Azeri leaders agree to change the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and agree to what the Karabakh Armenians want, other national minorities (Lezgians, Kurds, and Talyshins) will demand the same, thus endangering the country's integrity."<sup>12</sup>

The obvious dynamics of the negotiation process, more active involvement of the intermediaries, and the official statements coming from Baku that Azerbaijan is prepared to give Nagorno-Karabakh a higher autonomy status bred absolutely unfounded illusions among some of the experts about imminent federalization of the state. There was talk that the country would acquire a new administrative-territorial division by uniting all the districts into eight provinces which would be named after the cardinal points (with the exception of Nakhchivan and Nagorno-Karabakh).

This should not be ignored as idle talk. Certain representatives of the national minorities of Azerbaijan never stop talking about this; in 2009, they even tried to change the republic's map. Marco Shakhbanov, a self-appointed defender of the interests of the Avar minority in Azerbaijan (who has never been to the republic), was very radical: "Azerbaijan will consist of five autonomies: the Armenian Autonomous Republic with its capital in Stepanakert; the Talyshin Autonomous Republic with Lenkoran as its capital; the Lezghian Autonomous Republic with its center in Kusary; and the Avar Autonomous Republic with its center in Zakataly. Nakhchivan will preserve its present status of an autonomous republic."<sup>13</sup>

### **Conclusions.**

*The positive aspects:* ethnopolitical threats are neutralized in the short term, while the country moves closer to the European humanitarian standards.

*The negative aspects:* in the mid term (up to 10 years), the country might fall apart into ethnic units; separatist sentiments in these areas will mount to make foreign interference probable.

*The strategy involved:* the so-called historical compromise achieved on the basis of ethnic self-identification borders on betrayal of the Azeris' key national interests.

Indeed, a national-territorial federation in Azerbaijan presents the greatest threat to its ethnopolitical security; it can be described as a stage on the road toward complete liquidation of its national statehood.

### **Scenario 2—**

#### **"Unitization of Azerbaijan"**

While federalization of Azerbaijan is a domestic ethnopolitical scenario with serious regional geopolitical consequences, unitization presupposes that its borders will encompass the entire Azeri ethnic territory. This spells a radical change in the state borders, very much in line with the New Big Game, and provides a context for discussing two hypothetical projects related to the new format of Azeri statehood: the "larger" (American) and the

<sup>10</sup> M.S. Salikov, *Sravnitelny federalizm v SShA i Rossii*, Ekaterinburg, 1998, p. 545.

<sup>11</sup> A.A. Zakharov, "Federalizm i globalizatsiia," available at [<http://www.politstudies.ni/N2004fulltext/2002/6/11.htm>].

<sup>12</sup> D. Malysheva, "Fenomen etnoseparatizma na Kavkaze i mirovoy opyt," available at [[http://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-04-1999/st\\_06\\_malysheva.shtml](http://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-04-1999/st_06_malysheva.shtml)].

<sup>13</sup> [<http://www.rosbalt.ru/2009/10/06/677554.html>].

"smaller" (Russian).

Sergey Markedonov of Russia has said the following about the "larger format": "The idea of an Anschluss of two Azerbaijanians, which looks fantastic today, might be politically needed some time in the future. The Karabakh issue might acquire a different dimension if Azerbaijan supports American policies in Iran, where separate parts will be fighting for 'self-identification.' Karabakh, a contested territory, will be the prize for showing loyalty to the global superpower. Another scenario is also possible, at least theoretically: Karabakh could be 'exchanged' for Southern Azerbaijan. In this case, the single ethnic territory divided (in the 1820s) between Iran and the Russian Empire will compensate for the loss of ethnically and politically alien Karabakh."<sup>14</sup>

It is no secret that in the context of preparations for a possible war with Iran, the American brain trusts are carefully studying the "Azeri card" (Michel Chossudovsky, independent Canadian policy researcher, has addressed the subject in his *The Iran War Theater's "Northern Front": Azerbaijan and the US Sponsored War on Iran*).<sup>15</sup> It figures prominently in the command-post exercises imitating retaliation of Iran's aggression against Azerbaijan in 2013 (the year of the 200th anniversary of the Gulistan Peace Treaty).<sup>16</sup>

Success is directly related to the numerical strength of the Iranian Azeris—16 million according to the *CIA — The World Factbook, 2010*<sup>17</sup>—or even up to 40 million, according to different sources. The exact figures are unknown: Iran does not reveal the details of its national and ethnic groups, which means that all assessments are based on indirect sources.<sup>18</sup>

Figures live their own lives: the revived issue of the "divided" Azeri nation and the almost fanatical idea of a 30-to-40-million-strong Azerbaijan caused quite a storm amid Western, Russian, Armenian, and other geostrategists busy calculating the pros and cons of this basically "overseas project." "The Azeri local crisis might provide the key to the reconstruction of the American Greater Middle East and to a possible Iranian war. Iranian Azerbaijan covers a territory with a population 2 or 3 times larger than in independent Azerbaijan. Any political transformations there—a stronger nationalist movement or its cruel repression by the Iranians in the course of a war—will inevitably echo in Baku. On the other hand, the war on Iran will transform Azerbaijan into a key military transportation corridor between the American and NATO troops in Afghanistan and Central Asia and the metropolitan country."<sup>19</sup> Zardusht Alizade of Azerbaijan thinks differently: "There is no threat of ethnic disintegration for Iran; everything being said about Iran's disintegration and the unification between

Southern and Northern Azerbaijan does not hold water."<sup>20</sup>

The second geopolitical project, suggested by the Institute of the CIS, can be described as Russian; it proceeds from three basic assumptions: Baku declines an invitation to join NATO and is compensated with seven so-far occupied districts. "If Baku sticks to the rules of the game and does not rock the Caucasian boat Moscow might, at some time in future, reward it with the Marneuli District of Georgia in exchange for Nagorno-Karabakh."<sup>21</sup> No commentary is needed.

It seems that global and regional geopolitical developments notwithstanding, we should avoid extremes of the "Greater Azerbaijan" or "Azerbaijan—the Heart of Eurasia" type. Strength is not based on population size (otherwise the Arabs would have defeated Israel), but on the extent to which the people living in one state are aware of their unity with it. To quote Cicero, people are tied together by shared acceptance of laws and common interests.

## Conclusions.

*The positive side:* the hypothetical possibility of achieving a fragmentary or total continuity of the Azeri ethnic field as a single ethnosocial organism.

*The negative side:* there is the threat that the national secular development model might be replaced with a religious fundamentalist one with unpredictable consequences and a civil war.

*The strategy involved:* it boils down to a wait-and-see policy which will inevitably make Azerbaijan part of all sorts of geopolitical combinations of the leading world players fraught with a chain of local conflicts.

<sup>14</sup> [<http://www.apn.ru/publications/article1255.htm>], 20 January, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> See: M. Chossudovsky, "The Iran War Theater's 'Northern Front': Azerbaijan and the US Sponsored War on Iran," available at [<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php&rurl>],

<sup>16</sup> See: "Baku grozit vojna s Tegeranom, Vashington obeshchaet podderzhku," available at [<http://www.nregion.com/news.php?i=21347>], 3 March, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> [<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>], 4 March, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> See: F. Alekperli, "Azerbaidzhan I tiurkskiy mir" available at [<http://www.zerkalo.az/2009-11-21/politics/4828>]

<sup>19</sup> » [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1268636040>], 12 March 2010.

<sup>20</sup> [<http://www.echo-az.com/politica01.shtml>].

<sup>21</sup> [<http://br.az/index.php?newsid=1195>].

### Scenario 3—

#### "Integration of Azerbaijan"

Today, there are three more or less clear integration trends:

- The Euro-Atlantic (the U.S., Europe)—through the European Union and NATO;
- The Eurasian (Russia, China)—through the EurAsEC, SCO, and CSTO;
- The Turkic-Islamic (Turkey, Iran)—through the OIC.

*Euro-Atlantic integration* is high on the list of priorities. The National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan says in Para 4.1.2: "Integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic political, security, economic, and other institutions constitutes the strategic goal of the Republic of Azerbaijan."<sup>22</sup> We should bear in mind, however, that the obvious advantages are balanced out by unacceptable limitations of Azerbaijan's national sovereignty, in particular:

- The primacy of the right to self-identification over the principle of border immutability;
- The primacy of European laws over domestic legislation;
- Appearance of NATO military bases in national territory.

We should ask ourselves whether we are prepared to accept the above. On the other hand, it remains to be seen whether the European structures are ready for equal cooperation with Azerbaijan.

*Eurasian integration.* Some of the Soviet successor-states regard it as inevitable due to the increased political and economic weight of Russia and China. The media are brimming with predictions of a revived Soviet Union and of China swallowing up Central Asia. This means that the state cannot be too cautious when choosing its integration vector—and its future.

The *Turkic-Iranian integration* choice is being heated up by the talks about Turkic and Islamic solidarity. Today, however, the somewhat haphazard efforts of the Turkic leaders to blend the two principles, combined with the foreign policy course aimed at a "zero level of problems" with neighbors, are creating new problems. The optimism of those who, on the whole, favor this choice is somewhat dampened by the power legitimacy crisis in Iran. Both Turkey and Iran are using integration slogans to realize their own ideas about the region's future. Indeed, they may push their disagreements aside to resolve their Kurdish problem at the expense of Azerbaijan, even if this is hardly realizable.

#### Conclusions.

*The positive side:* once part of a larger integration structure, the country will accelerate its social and economic development and speed up its modernization.

*The negative side:* integration will threaten the Azeris' ethnic and cultural identity; there will be inevitable ethnic transformations that will change their ethnic self-awareness and ethnic identity.

*The strategy involved:* planting alien normative values in people's minds.

All the strategies have both positive and negative sides; here I put on the table another, normative, scenario.

#### Scenario 4- New Regionalism

I have written above that the Caucasian region badly needs a successful model of regional security and political and economic cooperation. So far, all the initiatives in this sphere have failed, probably because they never offered a higher type of cooperation. Indeed, the nationalities that belong to the Caucasian civilization can and should live together; they should not try to join the bandwagon of globalization (very alien to them in terms of mentality, culture, and values), but should try to organize a train of their own.

According to Eldar Ismailov, prominent Azeri expert in Caucasian studies: "At the beginning of the 21st century, the principles, forms, and methods of new regionalism in the Caucasus should be largely determined based on joint use of the economic potential of the Central Caucasian and Central Asian countries and their transportation-communication networks in the system of world economic relations. In this way, the Central Caucasus, after becoming a fundamental component of a single and integrated Central Eurasian region, will be able to fully perform its geo-economic function, which, in turn, will promote the creation of favorable conditions for dynamic growth of the economy and national prosperity in the region's countries."<sup>23</sup>

It is more or less widely believed that a single Caucasian ethnosocial structure can draw upon what has already been achieved: Azerbaijan as the "economic heart" complete with the arteries of the Transcaucasian

<sup>22</sup> "The National Security Conception of the Azerbaijan Republic. 23 May, 2007," available at [[http://www.mns.gov.az/download/Milli\\_Tehluksizlik\\_Konsepsiyasi.pdf](http://www.mns.gov.az/download/Milli_Tehluksizlik_Konsepsiyasi.pdf)] (in Azeri).

<sup>23</sup> E. Ismailov, "New Regionalism in the Caucasus: A Conceptual Approach," *The Caucasus & Globalization*, Vol. 1 (1), 2006, p. 25.

pipelines, etc. This alliance (the Caucasian Union) cannot and should not ape the European Union for obvious reasons; its functional capabilities bring it closer to the structures of the MERCOSUR and NAFTA type. More than that: it should become a community, the security of which rests on mutual trust and the non-use of force in the event of disagreements. Strange as it may seem today, it is suggested that a South Caucasian Confederation should be set up with the right of property ensured across its entire territory undivided by state borders.<sup>24</sup>

Today, this looks like another Utopia for the simple reason that the memories of past troubles and the geography of state borders will persist for a long time to come. On the other hand, relations between France and Germany were likewise burdened with memories of the past, but they were nevertheless able in 1951, by exerting their political will, to lay the foundations of European integration. This means that we should continue our theoretical and applied studies of regional integration institutions and projects.

### **C o n c l u s i o n**

To sum up the above, I would like to draw on French geopolitician Yves Lacoste, who identifies at least three factors conducive to state rivalry in any geographic zone:

- Their involvement in international exchange;
- The presence of vitally important resources;
- The symbolic significance of certain places.<sup>25</sup>

This fits Azerbaijan to perfection, which means that the above scenarios should not be viewed as purely theoretical possibilities of wider political decision-making. They help us to arrive at an adequate appraisal of the country's strategic priorities of its ethnopolitical security.

---

<sup>24</sup> [<http://www.rosbalt.ru/2010/02/26/715935.html>], 26 February, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> See: Ph. Moreau Defarges, *Vvedenie v geopolitiku, Konkord*, Moscow, 1994, pp. 67-69.