

FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES OF AZERBAIJAN

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Introduction

Main task of a state's foreign policy involves forming long-term strategic programs based on its strength, resources, geography (i.e. positions of regional and neighboring states) and global standing. These strategic plans form the state's foreign policy priorities, which are constantly refined and categorized to address key issues over time [9, p. 299].

Particularly, foreign policy of 'rising minor powers' is heavily influenced by domestic factors, external realities and capacity constraints [2; 14; 17]. Rising powers (RPs) face more constraints than developed nations, limiting their policy options and leading to prioritization in foreign policy [2]. Although foreign policy helps states assert independence and identity, rising powers are more vulnerable to external pressures and tend to spend resources on priority political actions in their foreign policy [11; 14].

Prioritization allows RPs to concentrate their financial, administrative, and political resources on specific areas where they can make a significant impact [12, pp. 5–]). By focusing on a few critical issues, states develop issue-specific power. For instance, within the European Union, small states have been proactive in negotiations where their economic and political interests are at stake, often prioritizing between policy areas to maximize their influence [19, pp. 659–660].

In this respect, multilateralism is considered indispensable for RPs as a means to advance their foreign policy priorities by the help of strategies like prioritization and coalition-building [18, p. 9]. Within international bodies, RPs focus on policy areas of great importance or on direct benefits that are likely to compensate for their lack of overall structural power [18, p. 2].

In this article, the author will lay out the determinants of Azerbaijan's foreign policy, elaborating on what resources the country uses and what factors shape its foreign policy, and understand what kind of foreign policy strategies it pursues.

Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy Determinants and Priorities

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is significantly shaped by its geopolitical location and abundant hydrocarbon resources. Azerbaijan's vast hydrocarbon resources are backbone of its foreign policy, equally determining political and economic relations of the country. The export of these resources has enabled Azerbaijan to maintain a balanced foreign policy with numerous international players. To give 'neutral' tone to its balanced foreign policy, Azerbaijan even took the decision to join the Non-Aligned Movement in 2011, allowing Baku to stay equally distant to Western and Russian-led security organizations [7, p. 101].

Azerbaijan's strategic geographic position makes it a key player in regional integration projects of politico-economic nature such as the European Union's initiatives, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan maintains a balanced stance, hoping to derive greater benefits from a non-aligned position [20, pp. 29–30]. This policy is enshrined in the National Security Concept of Azerbaijan, announced in 2017, which states that "the Republic of Azerbaijan implements a multifaceted and balanced foreign policy."

Located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan finds itself in an advantageous as well as complex regional environment. The country has to pursue delicate and balanced foreign policy, being at the intersection of Russian led Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Economic Cooperation Organization influenced by Iran, and the Organization of Turkic States under Turkey's strong protection [9, p. 312]. Therefore, balanced regional policy is a vital determinant of Azerbaijan's security, hence foreign policy. According to one policy paper, Baku needs to maintain a multilateral foreign policy and balance between various actors to resolve frozen conflicts with neighbors and prevent new tensions [15, p. 3].

The concept of a balanced foreign policy or rather a 'multi-vectorism' was introduced by Heydar Aliyev in the early 1990s as a strategy of survival amid acute crises and threats to the nation's existence [16, pp. 3–4]. This multi-vector approach has been pivotal for Azerbaijan's foreign policy, focusing on equal engagement with various international actors while carefully abstaining from complete dependency on any single power bloc.

During interview, Haydar Aliyev summarized his vision of foreign policy, as "You have to take into consideration the interests of every country. You cannot be friends with some countries and enemies with others despite the fact that this is the way most countries function. Azerbaijan does not want to be an enemy with any country. At the same time, we will not become victim to another country's policies. Azerbaijan has its own independent policy [3]."

On the other hand, President Ilham Aliyev offered slightly different vision of the foreign policy with less enthusiasm to name it as 'balanced'. In an interview, Aliyev emphasized that Azerbaijan's foreign policy is not about balancing interests among various powers but is fundamentally driven by national interests to minimize risks and maximize benefits. Aliyev stated, "We are not seeking a balance. We simply protect our national interests [4]..." This echoes with political analysis that "Azerbaijan makes episodic decisions based on its interests without crossing redlines [1]."

One of the first prominent documents in the area of foreign policy is the "National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan", adopted in May 2007. It emphasizes the state's independence, territorial integrity, and democratic development, with a strategic focus on integration into the Euro-Atlantic space and maintaining a balanced foreign policy.

Azerbaijan aims to contribute to the Euro-Atlantic security architecture while sharing progressive European values and Islamic cultural heritage. The concept prioritizes restoring territorial integrity, integrating into European and Euro-Atlantic security structures (i.e. NATO). In this regard, the concept declares the readiness of Azerbaijan to contribute to the unified security system in Europe, warning against geographical and political friction of security within Europe.

Participation within international organizations is also considered a top priority in the concept: "Ac-

tive participation of the Republic of Azerbaijan in the work of international organizations is of great importance for its security and foreign policy... international organizations, in addition to helping to eliminate or prevent threats, create opportunities to protect the national interests of the Republic of Azerbaijan in global politics [6]."

In his October 1993 speech at the swearing-in ceremony, President Heydar Aliyev emphasized the importance of ensuring Azerbaijan's state independence through foreign policy [10]. He advocated for equal, mutually beneficial relations with all countries. Aliyev highlighted the need to use international organizations like the UN and OSCE to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and reclaim occupied territories, ensuring Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Similarly, the "Military Doctrine of the Republic of Azerbaijan", adopted in June 2010, outlines the factors affecting regional security, such as geopolitical instability, unresolved conflicts (i.e. separatism), and threat to economic interests (i.e. sabotage of energy infrastructure). The doctrine highlights the occupation of Azerbaijani territories by Armenia and its negative impact on national security by causing economic and social destruction. It stresses the importance of "condemnation and isolation of the aggressor by international organizations and all states [5]."

In contrast to the National Security Concept of 2007, the Military Doctrine of Azerbaijan does not explicitly use the word "integration" to depict future relations between Euro-Atlantic institutions and Azerbaijan. According to the doctrine Azerbaijan supports "efforts to create a security system in the Euro-Atlantic space, including the region where the Republic of Azerbaijan is located [8]..."

In his speech at the 5th session of the heads of Azerbaijani diplomatic services in July 2014, President Ilham Aliyev discussed the evolution of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. While, in the early years of independence, foreign policy focused on European and Western partnerships due to economic interests of the West, particularly in the oil and gas sector of Azerbaijan, the new shift recently occurred toward developing relations with Asian countries in 2010s [13].

However, a real paradigm shift is currently taking place in Azerbaijan's foreign policy priorities

as the existential problem of securing territorial integrity has been solved following the Second Karabakh War in 2020. For the rising power, occupation posed enormous security threat and the burden of this security crisis was reflected in all foreign policy documents of the republic up until 2020. Moreover, the occupation had deep moral, economic and societal implications (i.e. having more than a million refugees and internally displaced persons in Azerbaijan) which further necessitated lasting solution taking Azerbaijan's demands into account.

After full restoration of state sovereignty over Karabakh, new opportunities and realities are arising as Azerbaijan is involved in the reconstruction of Karabakh under the concept of "Great Return" (Böyük Qayıdış). Thus, Azerbaijan's foreign policy priorities are experiencing major evolution, the end results and ramifications of which are still unfolding.

First attempts to reshape and diversify its foreign policy priorities after the Second Karabakh War can be observed in the "Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development" document adopted in February 2021. This framework urges the country to effectively cooperate with leading international organizations and specialized consulting companies. It aims to attract direct foreign investment, particularly from strategic investors in infrastructural sectors, to bolster Azerbaijan's economic development and reform initiatives, especially in regained territories.

At this point, it is helpful to concisely illustrate the priorities themselves. Take note that the author lists those priorities based on the analysis of foreign policy documents, literature review and study of Azerbaijan's actions within international organizations. Also, this list does not suggest hierarchical order of priorities, although until very recently "settlement of the Karabakh conflict" was on the top of the list.

1. Resolution of the Karabakh conflict: Azerbaijan mobilized all its efforts to protect and strengthen its sovereignty and territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders.

2. Post-conflict recovery of Karabakh: The settlement of the Karabakh conflict is evidently replaced by this foreign policy priority. The policy focuses on the reconstruction and development of liberated territories.

3. Energy, trade and transportation: Develop mul-

tilateral economic relations and implement Azerbaijan's energy and transport strategy. Foster trade and energy connectivity, promoting regional infrastructure projects to position Azerbaijan as a link between Europe and Asia.

4. Integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and defense enhancement: Azerbaijan pursues strategic integration into Euro-Atlantic security, economic and, to a lesser degree, political institutions. The main priority is to build defense capabilities through cooperation with NATO, ultimately reaching NATO standards. However, overall integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions is overshadowed by the country's opening up to other regions and international organizations as the world's 'economic and military centers' shift.

5. Cooperation with international organizations and all other states: Establish and maintain good relations with regional countries and achieve a wide representation in international, regional, economic, scientific, technical, cultural, humanitarian, and other organizations.

Discussion and Conclusion

Azerbaijan's foreign policy has been chronically shaped by the conflict with Armenia and the need to maintain territorial integrity, which affect the country's diplomatic strategies and overwhelm its resources. Azerbaijan's incessant search for new platforms to convey the realities about Armenian occupation deserves attention. For this reason alone, Azerbaijan used all diplomatic means, insisting on the inclusion of the Karabakh issue in several documents of international relevance.

Therefore, one of the foremost priorities for Azerbaijan is the restoration of its territorial integrity and subsequently the reconstruction of liberated territories – Nagorno-Karabakh and 7 adjacent districts. After gaining control of its territories in the Second Karabakh War in 2020, Azerbaijan has focused on rebuilding infrastructure and ensuring the safe return of displaced persons.

Economically speaking, Azerbaijan seeks to enhance trade and energy cooperation, aiming to diversify transportation routes and become an architecture of the regional connectivity as a transit hub. The country's active participation in projects led by international organizations underlines its willingness to developing modern transport and energy

transmission networks, which are crucial for regional economic growth. Azerbaijan acknowledges that 'economic matters' constitute a crucial component of cooperation within international organization.

In fact, Azerbaijan's foreign policy is heavily influenced by its geopolitical location and natural resources. Azerbaijan leverages its position, being located at the crossroads of regional and global trade routes, to enhance its strategic significance and economic potential. On the other hand, hydrocarbon resources have been a determining factor in Azerbaijan's foreign policy direction. Large reserves of oil and gas in Azerbaijan became major drivers of its energy diplomacy and economic initiatives.

Overall, Azerbaijan's 'balanced' regional policy demonstrates the country's strategic adaptation to regional and global dynamics. This policy aims to maximize national interests, ensure security, and foster economic development while maintaining a degree of independence and sovereignty in Azerbaijan's international relations.

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Azərbaycanın xarici siyasət prioritetləri **XÜLASƏ**

Bu araşdırmanın məqsədi Azərbaycanın xarici siyasət prioritetlərini müəyyən etməkdir. Məqalədə Azərbaycanın xarici siyasətinin əsas istiqamətlərindən bəhs edilir, onun xarici siyasətini hansı amillərin formalaşdırdığı və hansı xarici siyasət strategiyası həyata keçirdiyinə dair ətraflı təhlillər aparılır. Məqalə siyasi sənədlərin, rəsmi bəyanatların, eləcə də mövcud ədəbiyyatın təhlilinə əsaslanmışdır. Tədqiqat göstərir ki, Azərbaycan Qarabağ münaqişəsinin həlli, işğal nəticəsində yaranan təhlükəsizlik problemlərini dilə gətirmək və regional enerji, ticarət və nəqliyyat layihələrində aparıcı rol oynamaq kimi prioritet sahələr üzrə səylərini gücləndirir və nəticədə yüksələn güc kimi öz qlobal təsirini artırır.

Açar sözlər: *Azərbaycan, xarici siyasət, Qarabağ, əməkdaşlıq, enerji, ticarət*

Внешнеполитические приоритеты **Азербайджана** **РЕЗЮМЕ**

Целью данного исследования является понимание основных направлений внешней политики Азербайджана. В статье излагаются детерминанты внешней политики Азербайджана, подробно излагаются факторы, формирующие его внешнюю политику, и какие внешнеполитические стратегии он реализует. В статье приоритетные направления внешней политики Азербайджана будут выведены из ключевых внешнеполитических документов. Исследование изучает взаимодействия Азербайджана с различными международными организациями путем анализа политических документов, официальных заявле-

ний, а также существующей литературы. Исследование показывает, что Азербайджан усиливает свои действия по разрешению карабахского конфликта, выражения своих опасений по поводу безопасности, вызванных оккупацией, и получения признания в региональных энергетических, торговых и транспортных проектах, усиливая свое мировое влияние как растущей державы.

Ключевые слова: *Азербайджан, внешняя политика, Карабах, сотрудничество, энергетика, торговля*

SUMMARY

The aim of this study is to understand the main foreign policy directions of Azerbaijan. The article lays out the determinants of Azerbaijan's foreign policy, elaborating on what factors shape its foreign policy, and what kind of foreign policy strategies it pursues. In the article, priority foreign policy directions of Azerbaijan will be deduced from key foreign policy documents. The research involves examining policy documents, official statements, as well as existing literature. The study finds that Azerbaijan amplifies its efforts regarding the resolution of the Karabakh conflict, voice its security concerns resulting from the occupation, and gain recognition in the regional energy, trade and transportation projects, enhancing its global influence as a rising power.

Keywords: *Azerbaijan, foreign policy, Karabakh, cooperation, energy, trade.*