



Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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Abstract

The over-riding objective of Azerbaijan's foreign policy has been to secure a solution to the longstanding conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh on Azerbaijan's terms. Consequently, Azerbaijan's foreign policy is focused primarily on strengthening ties with those states and organizations that are perceived as willing and able to help it achieve that objective. Azerbaijan's motivation for prioritizing a solution to the Karabakh conflict is two-fold. First, to remove the long-term security threat posed by the existence on Azerbaijani territory of an Armenian-populated enclave with a highly trained military. And second, to enhance Azerbaijan's international prestige and further its aspiration to parlay its Caspian hydrocarbon wealth into the status of the dominant power in the South Caucasus. The fundamental constraints Azerbaijan faces in pursuing these twin objectives result from its geographical location, between the Caspian and the Black Sea, bordering on Russia to the north and Iran to the south. Azerbaijan's geopolitical environment has impelled Azerbaijan to pursue a maximally balanced and pragmatic foreign policy necessitating a "compartmentalization" of bilateral relations with its neighbours and global partners.

Keywords: *Azerbaijan / Foreign policy / Nagorno-Karabakh conflict / Caucasus / Armenia / Russia / Iran / Turkey / Georgia / Natural gas / Oil / Pipelines*

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by Elizabeth Fuller*

Introduction

Even though Azerbaijan's leaders do not openly identify it as such, the over-riding objective of Azerbaijan's foreign policy for the past 16 years has been to secure a solution to the longstanding conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh on Azerbaijan's terms, which are the preservation of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, the withdrawal of Armenian forces from occupied Azerbaijani territory, and the return of the former Azerbaijani population of the region, which would be granted "broad autonomy". Consequently, Azerbaijan's foreign policy engagement - whether bilateral or multilateral - is focused primarily (but not exclusively) on strengthening ties with those states and organizations that are perceived as willing and able to help it achieve that objective, and minimizing the threat posed by states seen as out to sabotage any such settlement.

This paper will evaluate Azerbaijan's relations with those various categories of foreign policy actors in terms of how successful (or unsuccessful) they have been in furthering that ultimate goal.

1. Background

The Karabakh conflict began in February 1988 when tens of thousands of Armenians staged mass demonstrations in Yerevan in support of a formal request by the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast to the Soviet leadership to designate the predominantly Armenian-populated region part of the then Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). The Soviet leadership rejected that demand and imposed direct rule in a bid to contain sporadic low-level fighting during which most of the region's estimated 40,000 Azerbaijani residents fled.

Following the collapse of the USSR in late 1991 and the withdrawal of Russian army units from Azerbaijan, the combined Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh defence forces succeeded in cementing control over the breakaway region, which had formally declared its independence from the USSR in a referendum in December 1991. In 1992-1993, those forces occupied seven districts of Azerbaijan contiguous to Nagorno-Karabakh, the Azerbaijani population of which also fled. In May 1994, a ceasefire was signed in Bishkek that ended full-scale hostilities, but which has not prevented sporadic

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exchanges of fire along the Line of Contact east of Nagorno-Karabakh that separates the Armenian and Azerbaijani forces deployed there. Mediation efforts launched in 1992 by the so-called "Minsk Group" of the Council for Security and Cooperation in Europe (renamed in 1994 the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) have failed to yield a lasting political solution to the conflict.

2. Karabakh as a factor in foreign policy

Azerbaijan's motivation for prioritizing a solution to the Karabakh conflict is two-fold. First, to remove the long-term security threat posed by the existence on Azerbaijani territory of an Armenian-populated enclave with a highly trained military, and whose leadership could hypothetically, by virtue of its close ties with the Republic of Armenia, call on the political and military support of the Russian Federation for help if under threat. And second, to enhance Azerbaijan's international prestige and further its aspiration to parlay its strategic assets - its Caspian hydro-carbon wealth - into the status of the dominant power in the South Caucasus.

Azerbaijan's oil and gas reserves are at the same time one of the most effective instruments at its disposal in its efforts to resolve the Karabakh conflict. First, they have served since the early 1990s to focus the interest of the US (and later also of the European Union) in underpinning regional stability, and specifically in undercutting the influence in the South Caucasus of Russia and Iran. And second, the successful exploitation and the export of Azerbaijan's oil and gas via a pipeline network beyond Moscow's control has provided the cash needed to modernize, train and re-arm Azerbaijan's armed forces with the possible long-term objective of launching a military offensive to win back control over Nagorno-Karabakh.

While it could be argued that the development and export of Azerbaijan's Caspian oil and gas is a separate end in itself, I would argue that it is a means to multiple ends, including funding the reconstruction of Baku as a dynamic 21st century metropolis, and as political leverage to win geopolitical concessions. For example, in 2009 Azerbaijan used the threat of an increase in the price of gas it sells to Turkey to pressure Ankara to rethink its policy of rapprochement with Armenia.¹

3. Regional context

The fundamental constraints Azerbaijan faces in pursuing the interlinked twin objectives of exploiting its hydrocarbon resources and resolving the Karabakh conflict result from its geographical location, between the Caspian and the Black Sea, bordering on Russia to the north and Iran to the south. Of its five neighbours, it is in a state of undeclared war with one (Armenia) and regards two others (Russia and Iran) as Armenia's allies and thus inherently hostile. Only Georgia and Turkey are perceived as partners and allies.

¹ US Embassy Baku, *Azerbaijan: Socar Insights On Botas Financial Pressure, Gas Negotiations* (Cable 09BAKU976), 18 December 2009, <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=09BAKU976>.

Moreover, bilateral relations with those individual neighbouring states are conditioned by their evolving relations among themselves, in particular the development of Turkey's relations with Russia and its abortive attempt in 2009 at rapprochement with Armenia.

The same holds true for Azerbaijan's relations with the United States and the European Union, both of which need to balance their relations with Azerbaijan against their ties with, and in the case of the EU its dependence on, Russia. After all, the EU still buys more than 25 percent of its gas from Russia's Gazprom.²

That largely unfavourable geopolitical environment has of necessity impelled Azerbaijan to pursue a maximally balanced and pragmatic foreign policy. Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov described this approach to the *Financial Times* in September 2008 as follows: "We are trying to be friends with everybody, at the same time as acting in accordance with our national interests."³

This pragmatic approach at times necessitates "compartmentalization" in bilateral relations, meaning that Baku will actively promote cooperation in one field (e.g. economy) despite tensions in another (e.g. military/security cooperation). Conversely, a strategic advantage in one field may be used to leverage concessions in another. In addition, the relative importance given to individual aspects may shift over time.

3.1. Russia

Of Azerbaijan's five neighbours, Russia is by far the most powerful and the one with which Azerbaijan arguably has the closest ties by virtue of their shared Soviet heritage. Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev graduated from Moscow's prestigious Institute of World Economy and International Relations. His late father Heidar Aliyev was a Politburo member and served from 1992-1996 as a deputy chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers.

Russia also exerts varying degrees of influence over the other four states that border Azerbaijan. It is accepted wisdom that since the early 1990s Moscow has sought by all the means at its disposal to neutralize and undercut US efforts to extend its influence into the South Caucasus. One of the most blatant instances of such meddling was the Russian-sponsored insurrection in June 1993 by then Azerbaijani Prime Minister Suret Huseinov that ended with the flight from Baku of pro-Turkish President Abulfaz Elchibey and the return to power of Heidar Aliyev, father of the current president, who had headed the Communist Party of Azerbaijan from 1969-1982.

Russia under then President Boris Yeltsin proved incapable of preventing the signing in 1994 of the so-called "Deal of the Century" between the Azerbaijani leadership and a consortium of Western oil companies to exploit the Azeri-Chirag-Giuneshli oil fields. Russia's LUKoil secured a 10 percent stake in that deal, the first of over a dozen to

² See Eurostat, *Energy statistics: Imports (by country of origin) - gas - annual data (nrg_124a)*, <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/energy/data/database>. See also Gazprom, *Gas Export and Enhancing Reliability of Gas Supply to Europe: Press Conference Background*, 20 June 2012, <http://www.gazprom.com/press/conference/2012/export-to-europe>.

³ Isabel Gorst, "Azerbaijan oil moves likely to worry west", in *The Financial Times*, 25 September 2008.

extract and export Azerbaijan's Caspian oil wealth. Twin pipelines were built via Georgia and Turkey to export that oil, and gas from the first stage of the huge Shah Deniz gas field discovered in 1999, to international markets bypassing Russian territory. It is thanks to its hydrocarbon wealth that Azerbaijan in 2011 generated 72 percent of the combined GDP of the three South Caucasus states.⁴

In July 1997, Azerbaijan and Russia signed a 12-page Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Security⁵ that contains clauses on promoting international security systems and respect for the territorial integrity of both countries.

At the same time, Russia has high-level of military cooperation with Armenia, maintaining a military base there and selling arms at knock-down prices, and thereby contributing to strengthening Armenia's position *vis-à-vis* Azerbaijan with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Russia is engaged on two levels in the ongoing international effort to mediate a solution to the Karabakh conflict. Together with the US and France, it jointly co-chairs the OSCE Minsk Group established for that purpose in 1992. At the same time, it convenes occasional meetings between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Dmitry Medvedev organized a dozen such meetings during his tenure as Russian president from 2008-2012. The first meeting, in November 2008, resulted in the so-called Meiendorf Declaration, the first document to be signed by the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents since 1994. That declaration affirmed the commitment of all parties to resolving the conflict by peaceful diplomatic means.⁶

Medvedev and Ilham Aliyev had signed a similar bilateral declaration during Medvedev's visit to Baku several months earlier, affirming their support for the Minsk Group's mediation efforts to bring about a peaceful solution to the conflict founded on international law, in the first instance ensuring Azerbaijan's sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁷

Those Russian declarations notwithstanding, some observers remain skeptical that a definitive solution of the conflict, whether as a result of negotiations or of renewed hostilities, is in Russia's interests. A new war, whether undertaken deliberately by Baku or resulting from an exchange of fire on the Line of Contact separating the Armenian and Azerbaijani armed forces that escalated out of control, would face Russia with the choice whether or not to intervene on the side of Armenia in line with its commitments under the Commonwealth of Independent States Collective Security Treaty. Intervention would create a risk of Turkey providing military support to Azerbaijan,

⁴ World Bank, *World Development Indicators & Global Development Finance*, <http://databank.worldbank.org/ddp/home.do?Step=12&id=4&CNO=2>.

⁵ "Russia, Azerbaijan Sign Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation", in *RFE/RL Newslines*, 7 July 1997, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1141444.html>.

⁶ *Декларация Азербайджанской Республики, Республики Армения и Российской Федерации* (Declaration of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Armenia and the Russian Federation), Meiendorf Castle, Moscow, 2 November 2008, <http://archive.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2008/11/208670.shtml>.

⁷ Russian Presidency, *Press Statements after Russian-Azerbaijani Talks*, Baku, 3 July 2008, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/07/03/2030_type82914type82915_203553.shtml.

which in turn would seriously damage Russian-Turkish relations. Failure to protect Armenia would call into question the *raison d'être* of the Collective Security Treaty.

However, preserving the *status quo* gives Moscow a degree of leverage over both Armenia and Azerbaijan and thus contributes to upholding its desired status as the dominant power in the South Caucasus. By the same token, the status quo and resulting uncertainty impose limitations on Azerbaijan's engagement with the US and thus, by extension, on the opportunities for Washington to expand its political and military presence in Azerbaijan to the detriment of Russia's interests.

Notwithstanding such constraints, President Aliyev continues to express regularly his satisfaction with continued cooperation with Russia in other fields, including energy and trade. Russia was Azerbaijan's third largest foreign trade partner in 2011, after Italy and France.⁸

On two occasions over the past two years, however, Azerbaijan has taken major decisions on the basis of its own interests that run counter to those of Russia. The first was the signing in January 2011 of a joint declaration between Azerbaijan and the European Union on the development of a pipeline network to export Azerbaijani gas via Turkey.⁹ That was followed by two further Azerbaijani-Turkish agreements, in October and December that year, the latter on construction of a Trans-Anatolia Gas Pipeline (TAGAP) with a capacity of 16 billion cubic meters a year, to be operational in 2017.¹⁰ That agreement not only excludes Russia from exporting gas from the second stage of Azerbaijan's huge Shah Deniz field; if the pipeline were to be extended across the Caspian sea, it could serve as an alternative export route for Turkmen gas too.

The second was the protracted negotiations over whether and on what terms Azerbaijan would agree to extend the lease for the Gabala over-the-horizon radar station in central Azerbaijan that expired in December 2012. For the past 10 years, Russia paid Baku an annual lease of 7 million dollars for the use of the facility. In the course of negotiations in 2012, Azerbaijan sought to increase the lease to 15 million dollars, then to 150 million, then to 300 million (by comparison, Russia pays Kyrgyzstan just 4.5 million dollars annually for the use of a military base there). Russia, not surprisingly, rejected the Azerbaijani demand as excessive and after the agreement expired in December 2012 began removing equipment from the facility. Whether the perception that Moscow is no longer willing or able to expedite a settlement of the Karabakh conflict on terms favourable to Azerbaijan played a role in either decision is unclear.

⁸ Azerbaijan Statistical Committee, "External trade", in *Azerbaijan in Figures*, 2012, <http://www.azstat.org/publications/azfigures/2012/en/018en.shtml>

⁹ *Joint Declaration on the Southern Gas Corridor*, Baku, 13 January 2011, http://ec.europa.eu/energy/infrastructure/strategy/doc/2011_01_13_joint_declaration_southern_corridor.pdf.

¹⁰ Azerbaijan Presidency, *Working visit of Ilham Aliyev to Turkey*, 25 October 2011, <http://en.president.az/articles/3959>; and 26 June 2012, <http://en.president.az/articles/5279>; SOCAR, *Memorandum for construction of Trans Anadolu Gas Pipeline signed*, 26 December 2011, <http://new.socar.az/socar/en/news-and-media/news-archives/news-archives/id/4086>.

3.2. Iran

Despite historic, religious and cultural ties, Azerbaijan's relations with Iran over the past two decades have been characterized by profound mutual suspicion and mistrust. Azerbaijan fears Iranian attempts to export the Islamic revolution, and has arrested and brought to trial members of the unregistered Islamic Party of Azerbaijan and the Talysh minority on charges of spying for Iran. Iran is suspicious of Azerbaijan's defense ties with its arch-enemy Israel, and aware that its own large Azerbaijani minority constitutes a potential fifth column.

This leads to errors of perception, with both sides exaggerating the perceived threat posed by the other and over-reacting to its rhetoric. Tensions have escalated over the past 12 months, with Iran accusing Azerbaijan of helping Israel to assassinate Iranian nuclear scientists and facilitating possible Israeli and US air strikes against the Islamic Republic's nuclear facilities. The Azerbaijani government strongly denies this, and has repeatedly affirmed that despite the threat posed by Iran's nuclear enrichment programme, it will never allow its territory to be used for a military attack on Iran. Iran recalled its ambassador from Baku in May 2012 after months of bitter recriminations between the two countries over alleged interference in each other's affairs.

The mutual distrust has not, however, prevented Iran from offering to mediate a solution of the Karabakh conflict. It brokered two, albeit short-lived, ceasefires in 1992. Although the OSCE Minsk Group was established partly to exclude Tehran from the Karabakh peace process, Iran has continued to volunteer its services, most recently in December 2012, when an Iranian presidential advisor argued that Tehran could mediate more effectively than the OSCE Minsk Group.¹¹ Iran's motivation for doing so is linked to its aversion to Washington's engagement in the South Caucasus. Iran's ambassador to Armenia, Seyed Ali Saghaeyan, stressed that Tehran categorically opposes the inclusion of US forces in any eventual international peacekeeping force deployed to the region.¹² Consequently, the Azerbaijani leadership has little incentive or interest in accepting a mediation offer that serves primarily Tehran's own interests.

3.3. Turkey

Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Turkey immediately began cementing ties with all the turcophone successor states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). But its interaction with Azerbaijan was by far the closest in light of the shared perception that Turks and Azeris comprise "two states but one people". Moreover, Turkey (and Georgia) emerged as Azerbaijan's strategic partners in construction of the export pipelines for Azerbaijan's Caspian oil and gas that traverse their territory. The cooperation between Baku and Ankara in the energy sphere has not always been smooth, however. On the contrary, there have been

¹¹ "Иран может быть намного эффективней, чем МГ ОБСЕ - Советник президента ИРИ" (Iran could be far more effective than the OSCE Minsk Group - Iranian Presidential Advisor), in *Interfax-Azerbaijan*, 28 December 2012, <http://interfax.az/view/561995>; "Iran can find ways to solve Karabakh conflict - presidential advisor", in *News.az*, 29 December, <http://www.news.az/articles/karabakh/74550>.

¹² Ruzanna Stepanian, "Iran Against U.S. Peacekeeping Role In Karabakh", in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Armenia*, 23 June 2010, <http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/2080247.html>.

protracted and at times acrimonious negotiations over the transit fees that Turkey would receive for Azerbaijan's oil and gas and the amount of gas it would be entitled to purchase, and at what price.

In terms of Karabakh mediation, Turkey has been a member of the OSCE Minsk Group since its creation, but never a co-chair, because its symbiotic relation with Azerbaijan calls into question its neutrality with regard to the conflict. Since the early 1990s, Turkey has provided significant military aid, advice, support and training to the Azerbaijani armed forces. Under two agreements signed in 2011, the two countries have begun joint production in Turkey of rifles and grenade launchers.¹³

Yielding to pressure from Baku, in early 2010 Turkish officials pegged ratification by the Turkish parliament of the protocols on establishing formal diplomatic relations with Armenia signed in October 2009 to a breakthrough in the deadlocked Nagorno-Karabakh peace process including the withdrawal of Armenian forces from seven districts of Azerbaijan contiguous to Nagorno-Karabakh.

3.4. Georgia

As a beneficiary of the transit of Azerbaijani oil and gas to international markets, Georgia has inevitably been the junior partner in its bilateral relations with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan for its part has counted on Tbilisi not jeopardizing the precarious balance of power in the South Caucasus by needlessly antagonizing Russia. For that reason, while Baku publicly affirmed its support for Georgia's territorial integrity in the wake of the August 2008 war with Russia precipitated by Georgia's attack on South Ossetia, the Azerbaijani leadership was angered by the threat Georgia created to the continued export of Azerbaijani Caspian oil.

Given that its own problems with the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia mirror Azerbaijan's own problem with Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia has consistently supported Azerbaijan's territorial integrity in international organizations, including the OSCE, the UN and GUAM (see below). It has not, however, offered to mediate independently.

4. The US and the EU as “strategic partners”

Washington's strategic interests in Azerbaijan are threefold: cooperation in ensuring the extraction and unimpeded export to Western markets via Georgia and Turkey of Azerbaijan's hydrocarbon resources; regional stability, meaning in the first instance containing the threat posed by Iran both in general and in terms of Tehran's potential for destabilizing Azerbaijan; and promoting democratization. Azerbaijan for its part has sought to prioritize its willingness and ability to cooperate on the first two of those objectives while consistently failing to meet repeated promises to adopt and comply with Western standards for media and religious freedom, democratic elections, human rights, and the rights of minorities.

¹³ “Turkey to expand small arms production with Azerbaijan”, in *Turkey Defence*, 17 March 2011, <http://www.turkeydefence.com/turkey-expand-small-arms-production-azerbaijan-303>.

At the same time, Baku resents and resists pressure from the US to act in a way perceived as endangering Azerbaijan's complex and uneasy relations with Russia. For example, when then US Vice President Dick Cheney travelled to Baku in the wake of the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war in the hope of eliciting a more unambiguous statement of Azerbaijan's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, he was not treated with the respect and diplomatic protocol his position required. Immediately after his departure, President Aliyev demonstratively flew to Moscow for consultations with senior Russian diplomats.

In contrast to Russia, US engagement in the search for a solution to the Karabakh conflict has been confined to its role as one of the three OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs. In that capacity, the US hosted talks in Key West, Florida in April 2001 that came very close to yielding a full-fledged and lasting peace document.

Azerbaijan is one of the six former Soviet republics (together with Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) engaged in the Eastern Partnership program with the EU launched in 2009 with the aim of helping to promote political and economic reforms and assisting the countries of the region to move closer to the EU. Azerbaijan's primary significance for the EU is as a potential long-term alternative supply of natural gas to Russia. As noted above, in January 2011, Azerbaijan and the EU signed a joint declaration on the development of a pipeline network to export Azerbaijan's Caspian gas via Turkey.

Like other international organizations, the EU regards Nagorno-Karabakh as an integral part of the territory of the Azerbaijan Republic and has formally condemned the presidential and parliamentary elections held there as illegal and an obstacle to resolving the conflict. But even though the EU regards a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a key strategic objective, it has never sought to engage in conflict mediation independently of the OSCE. On the contrary, EU officials have for years affirmed their readiness to support and complement the work of the OSCE Minsk Group. To that end, the EU drafted in 2006 contingency plans for deploying an international peacekeeping force in the region once a formal peace agreement was signed.

5. Other international partners and international organizations

Two key components of Azerbaijan's strategy of compensation for the constraints imposed by its geographical location are, first, to pursue mutually beneficial bilateral ties with numerous other countries, particularly in Asia and Latin America. Azerbaijan has diplomatic relations with 160 countries and diplomatic representation in 60. That extended network of relations undoubtedly helped it to secure non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council for the period 2012-2013. And second, membership in wide range of international organizations - not just the UN, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the Economic Cooperation Organization, and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization, but also the Non-Aligned Movement of which it became a member in July 2011.

GUAM was formed in late 1997 by the three former Soviet republics - Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova - that had lost control over part of their respective territories, plus Ukraine. Its unadvertised *raison d'être* was to coordinate efforts to prevent Russia from using those territorial conflicts to reassert its influence, and to promote the construction of export pipelines for Azerbaijan's Caspian oil bypassing Russia. The start in 2003 of construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, from which Ukraine was excluded, undercut the significance of GUAM. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and Ilham Aliyev have shown little interest or commitment to the alignment. Whether Azerbaijan concluded it had no further relevance or that it served as an unnecessary irritant in relations with Russia is not clear.

More than any other international organization, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which Azerbaijan joined in 1991, has consistently and unequivocally sided with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. It has adopted numerous resolutions at both foreign minister and summit level expressing support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and condemning Armenian "aggression" and calling for the unconditional withdrawal of Armenian forces from occupied Azerbaijani territory.¹⁴

Azerbaijan similarly regards the Non-Aligned Movement, which it joined in the summer of 2011, as a potential ally in its efforts to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov has said openly that membership in the Non-Aligned Movement would give his country "an additional platform" to pursue and seek support for a solution to the conflict - meaning not just any solution but a solution on Baku's terms.¹⁵

There are, however, two major international organizations of which Azerbaijan clearly does not consider membership a priority: NATO and the World Trade Organization.

Like virtually all other former Soviet republics, Azerbaijan signed up for NATO's Partnership for Peace program in the early 1990s. But unlike neighboring Georgia, Azerbaijan has never unequivocally expressed a formal desire to join NATO within a specific time frame.

In February 2007, the online Azerbaijani daily *Zerkalo.az* quoted "informed diplomatic sources" as saying that for the previous six months, NATO special representative for the South Caucasus Robert Simmons and other senior NATO officials had been trying to persuade Baku to make a formal declaration of its intention to seek NATO membership, but without success.¹⁶

Following a hiatus in cooperation after completion of a second Individual Partnership Action Plan, Azerbaijan concluded its third such Plan with NATO in December 2011 -

¹⁴ Azerbaijan Embassy Ankara, *Azerbaijan and OIC*, <http://www.azembassy.org.tr/index.php?options=content&id=93>.

¹⁵ "FM: Azerbaijan uses new platform to inform world community about position", *Trend*, 27 May 2011, <http://en.trend.az/news/politics/1883018.html>.

¹⁶ Liz Fukker, "Azerbaijan Seems Ambivalent About NATO Membership", in *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, 23 March 2007, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1347521.html>.

just months after the adoption of a new NATO Strategic Concept that redefines the right of the Alliance to engage actively to defend/protect its member states.

NATO officials have consistently affirmed their support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity while at the same time rejecting the possibility of trying to mediate a solution to the Karabakh conflict. Speaking at October 2010 NATO summit in Lisbon, for example, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said that while the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh remains an issue of concern for NATO, he did not see a separate role for the bloc in the settlement of the protracted conflict.¹⁷ Rasmussen said NATO supports the mediation efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group.¹⁸

It is not clear whether Baku's reluctance to make a firm commitment to NATO membership reflects disappointment at the alliance's reluctance to take a firmer stand over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict or simply a pragmatic conclusion that the benefits of NATO formal membership would not outweigh the aggravation of relations with Russia that it would be the inevitable consequence.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's foreign policy, in particular with regard to those countries and organizations capable of contributing to a solution of the Karabakh conflict on terms favorable to Baku, has been pragmatic, balanced, consistent, and aimed at extracting the maximum support in return for a minimum of concessions (for example, in the spheres of democratization and human rights). But it has not achieved the strategic objective of bringing about a solution to that conflict.

With the exception of the August 2008 Russian-Georgian war, Azerbaijan has not been faced with a major international crisis that demanded an immediate reaction. Whether and how it would succeed in maintaining the current balance in such circumstances remains to be seen.

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¹⁷ NATO, *Press conference by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the Lisbon Summit of Heads of State and Government*, Lisbon, 19 November 2010, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_68927.htm.

¹⁸ NATO, *Press point with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and the President of Armenia*, Serzh Sargsyan, Brussels, 25 May 2010, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_63920.htm. See also "Armenia Gets NATO Reassurance on Minsk Group Role for Karabakh", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Armenia*, 27 May 2010, <http://www.armenialiberty.org/content/article/2053667.html>.



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