

Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy: Seeking a Balance

By Rashad Shirinov, Baku

Abstract

Azerbaijan's initial preference for the West has evolved into efforts to balance among the established democracies, Russia, and Iran. The growth of the country's energy wealth has given the country's elite greater confidence that they can pursue an independent foreign policy course. The most symbolic manifestation of this new policy was the decision to join the non-aligned movement.

Introduction

Last year Azerbaijan celebrated twenty years of independence. In 2012, the Azerbaijani people will mark twenty years from the moment when the first (and probably the last) democratic elections of modern times took place in their country. Starting in 1993, Azerbaijan became an authoritarian country with a powerful presidency at the top of the executive branch, which completely monopolizes power and blocks legislative and judicial independence.

In this overview I will provide a holistic picture of Azerbaijani foreign policy as run and advocated by the government and also will describe different views from inside society on what the government does. Also I will explain the underpinnings of the state's behavior vis-à-vis the rest of the world. My argument here is that it would be difficult to understand Azerbaijani foreign policy and relations with other countries without taking into account the nature of the regime and the domestic political context of the country.

What Has Influenced Azerbaijan's Relations with the West?

Azerbaijan's foreign policy throughout the last twenty years has gone through oscillations that can best be described as a "policy of balancing", which reflects realist as opposed to idealist stances. There was a short period in Azerbaijan's foreign policy (between 1992 and 1993) when the new democratic leadership of the country based its policies on extremely idealistic and nationalistic principles. The Popular Front government under Elchibey emphasized Western integration at the expense of relations with Russia and Iran. This was a foreign policy based on the ideals of anti-colonialism and ethnic brotherhood. Russia and Iran were seen as two evil powers ready to encroach on Azerbaijan's sovereignty at any moment.

The defining feature of Azerbaijan's foreign policy after 1993 was that it never took sharp turns. Its steadiness reflected the fact that it expressed the will of the same political force since 1993. However, with the change from father to son (from Heydar Aliyev to Ilham Aliyev) in 2003, we can see a different approach to foreign policy that will be examined later in this article.

Thus, Azerbaijan's foreign policy, like that of many countries, is tightly linked to its domestic context and reflects the features of the political regime inside the country. Azerbaijan's foreign policy is based therefore on two issues: national interest and the interests of the ruling elite. Certainly, sometimes these two overlap and succeed in working together. At the beginning of independence, the ruling elite under Heydar Aliyev opted for a pro-Western orientation (joining the NATO Partnership for Peace, Council of Europe and other Western institutions). This stance promoted the broader national interest of European integration, while also providing the ruling elite with useful Western and international recognition as well as opportunities to realize economic benefits from the production and sale of oil and natural gas on global markets. The newly independent Azerbaijani ruling elite had just left the cage of the Soviet Union, so it made sense for them to look to the West, which had always seemed attractive from the "prison of nations." Energy contracts with big western companies provided the desired security for the regime and helped to establish necessary networks. During these first years, Azerbaijan's dependency on the West was visible in the behavior of the country's leaders: they were very attentive to everything spelled out in the West. Heydar Aliyev once joked that "the Politburo is in Washington nowadays." The survival of the ruling elite was closely connected to its relations with Western powers interested in oil and gas and Azerbaijan accepted without much discussion all the conventions, treaties and agreements in order to become a well-mannered member of international and, most importantly, Western institutions.

In the 1990s Azerbaijan took seriously the obligations it made to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and, later, the Council of Europe (after 2001). Also, Heydar Aliyev and his establishment paid considerable attention to using the OSCE and CoE as international forums to promote the country. The Lisbon Summit of the OSCE in December 1996 was remarkable in this respect. The Azerbaijani government managed to include in the resulting resolution a clause which confirmed "Azerbaijan's territorial integrity." This success was widely celebrated by the govern-

ment and the local mass media promoted stories about “the great victory of Azerbaijani diplomacy.” At the time, the opposition criticized and ridiculed this exaggerated feeling of self-importance.

“It’s All Our Domestic Issue”

A turning point came when Azerbaijan’s ruling elite started to become more self-confident and more independent. The rule of Ilham Aliyev has brought a different logic into the management of the country and its foreign relations. As one observer correctly explained: “Under Ilham Aliyev the country is run like a huge company. Heydar Aliyev was a statesman, Ilham Aliyev is a businessman. This is the biggest difference between policies before and after 2003.”

Heydar Aliyev was an old-time politician, who appreciated the political arena, enjoyed playing political games, and, most importantly, knew how to calibrate political action to achieve the desired result. Ilham Aliyev does not engage in political struggle; as a man of business, he is more excited about profit, efficiency and results. Under his rule, the authorities’ political restrictions and the changing economic situation effectively restrict opposition parties and civil society organizations. The current government possesses huge energy resources that it can use to mitigate any foreign or domestic risks.

After 2003 the role of European institutions in Azerbaijan’s foreign affairs decreased significantly. President Ilham Aliyev made it clear that “Europe does not wait for us with outstretched arms” and Azerbaijan’s entry into either the EU or NATO has never been a realistic possibility.

During this period, Baku was particularly displeased with Western criticism of Azerbaijan’s poor human rights record, widespread corruption and lack of good governance. Sometimes the government became paranoid and blamed western governments for critical articles published in those countries’ newspapers. For instance, the US came under attack by Azerbaijan’s official, pro-governmental media after a *Wall Street Journal* article disclosed the existence of extremely expensive property belonging to the president’s family. Recently, the speaker of the Azerbaijani parliament accused Germany of “being envious of Azerbaijan” following the NDR channel’s short program criticizing both the Azerbaijani government for violating the property rights of people in Baku on the eve of the Eurovision song contest to be held in May 2012 and the European Broadcasting Union for condoning these illegalities.

Regarding other countries’ comments and interventions on the issues of democratization and human rights, Baku’s position is clear: “Human rights are a domestic issue.” The West can do little in response. As a senior offi-

cial from the European Commission said off-the-record, “the EU has no leverage on Azerbaijan, because the government of Azerbaijan is not in need of money as they are in Georgia, Armenia or Ukraine. Thus, conditionality is not working in relation to Azerbaijan.”

Russia and the “Hegemony of Culture”

After Azerbaijan started to benefit from the influx of oil revenues, it has moved closer to Russia in terms of its political culture. Russian understandings of “sovereign” or “managed” democracy reflect the thinking of the Azerbaijani ruling elite in terms of its preference for avoiding any external interference into domestic issues based on “excuses of human rights and democracy.”

Russia as the “other side of the balance” became more attractive vis-à-vis the West, although the Azerbaijani establishment realizes that it cannot trust Russia. The Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 confirmed that these fears are legitimate. The Russian leadership made it clear “who’s the boss in the Caucasus” and the Azerbaijani leadership did not make any statement in support of Georgia, although it allegedly tacitly sent humanitarian support to its besieged neighbor.

Another sign of Azerbaijani–Russian rapprochement was that both of President Aliyev’s daughters married Russian businessmen of Azerbaijani origin and live in Moscow. Some observers say that these family ties are a factor that makes Azerbaijan vulnerable in its relationship vis-à-vis Moscow.

Relations with the US

Although the relations between the US and Azerbaijan have been cold in recent years, the ruling elite in Azerbaijan enjoys the current situation in which the US states its priorities for Azerbaijan as “energy, security and development” in that particular order. As US officials point out, development includes building institutions and improving governance. The rhetoric shows how policies have changed throughout the last decade and how the current US administration prioritizes security and energy over other issues. This stance has provoked constant criticism from civil society groups and opposition parties in Azerbaijan, who also blame Western governments and institutions for failing to defend Azerbaijani rights more forcefully.

In 2010 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Azerbaijan allegedly to improve relations between the two countries. Clinton’s message was interesting, since she did not meet opposition parties but did find time to sit down with youth activists. She sent the signal that the US has long-term plans for Azerbaijan, but for now the Americans will not “rock the boat” and will work with the current government.

Why Non-Alignment?

One of the most demonstrative signals of Azerbaijan's new foreign policy orientation was its decision to join the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in May 2011. Until then Belarus was the only CIS country which was a full member of this group.

Azerbaijan's action was a symbolic move to show two things. Firstly, it sought to demonstrate to the West that it should not push Azerbaijan too much in terms of human rights and democracy. The timing of the decision to join NAM followed the European Parliament's resolution condemning political persecutions in Azerbaijan. Secondly, as Hikmat Hajizade, a prominent Azerbaijani opposition thinker says, this foreign policy move was designed to address the fears of Iran about the potential use of Azerbaijani territories or airspace for possible attacks against Iran.

Conclusion

Oil money and the leverage energy provides in general made Azerbaijan reconsider its relations with the outside

About the Author

Rashad Shirinov is an independent political analyst based in Baku. He finished his graduate studies in Turkey, the UK and the US and has worked for OSCE Election Missions and US National Democratic Institute.

Georgia's Identity-Driven Foreign Policy and the Struggle for Its European Destiny

By Kornely Kakachia, Tbilisi

Abstract

Georgia, nestled between the Black Sea, Russia, and Turkey, and surrounded by the Caucasus Mountains, occupies a unique geographic space, which gives it strategic importance far beyond its size. Like other Eastern European nations in the middle of transition, it is trying to construct a collective identity which can be projected toward the international arena. While Georgia's foreign policy is considered pro-western and multifaceted, it is not always based on principles of pragmatic expediency. For example, Georgia pays little attention to areas outside the Western world, including the region where it is located. This is largely because its gaze is entirely fixed upon the West. Since the dynamics responsible for this policy grow out of the social, economic, and cultural transformation which Georgia is currently living through, this article argues that Georgian foreign policy priorities are mostly identity driven. It also claims that the predominant idea of the Georgian elites—a group that sometimes acts on behalf of the state—is that Georgia rightly belongs in the West. This devotion to the idea of full-fledged Euro-Atlantic integration as a “sacred destiny” has significant foreign policy implications.

Introduction

Since an effective foreign policy rests upon a shared sense of national identity, the foreign policy of small

world and the ruling elite now feels more independent and self-confident. This growing self-assurance has been the major factor behind changes in the attitude of official Baku towards the EU, US, Russia, NATO and Turkey.

Although with regard to political culture, Azerbaijan has shifted closer to authoritarian Russia, it still tries to preserve its independence. Hence, the decision to join the non-aligned movement, which is highly symbolic.

The Arab Spring has also made the Azerbaijani ruling elite more cautious in its relations with the US and Europe. Government spokespersons in Baku furiously deny even the slightest possibility that events sweeping the Middle East will recur in Azerbaijan.

Overall, for the foreseeable future, the Azerbaijani government will be open to economic projects and closed to any political message from outside regarding democratization.

states is dictated by a number of factors, some realistic, like geography, and some ideological, like identity. Conversely, foreign policy also has a great impact on