

Azerbaijan's Quest for Strategic Autonomy

Tabib Huseynov

Independent Policy Analyst and Researcher (Shusha, Azerbaijan)

Email: tabibhuseynov@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7526-2760>

Huseynov, Tabib (2024) Azerbaijan's Quest for Strategic Autonomy. *Ukrainian Policymaker*, Volume 15, 43-56. <https://doi.org/10.29202/up/15/5>.

This article explores Azerbaijan's evolving and increasingly more assertive foreign policy doctrine, which began to take shape following its victory over Armenia in the 2020 Second Karabakh War and was further solidified after its 2023 blitzkrieg operation, which dismantled institutionalized separatism within its territory. Conceptualized through the framework of strategic autonomy, this new doctrine is firmly anchored in realist and neorealist schools of thought, emphasizing pragmatic, interest-driven relationships with major regional and global powers while avoiding geopolitical entanglements. The paper argues that Azerbaijan's quest for strategic autonomy is both a response to external pressures and a means to assert agency within the broader Eurasian security landscape. It also describes Azerbaijan as a "geopolitical interconnector", capable of punching above its weight in contributing to international security, owing to its strategic location and diplomatic outreach across opposing blocs. The paper enriches scholarly discussions on strategic autonomy with a practical case study, offering a novel analytical framework to understand Azerbaijan's foreign policy and its potential impact on regional and global geopolitics.

Keywords: Strategic autonomy; Azerbaijan's foreign policy; power balance; geopolitical rivalries

Received: 12 December 2024 / Accepted: 23 December 2024 / Published: 30 December 2024

Introduction

The global "rules-based international order" is undergoing a profound crisis characterized by the decline of Western dominance, the rise of a more fragmented and multipolar world, and the resultant uncertainty over the future of international relations. Russia's blatant and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine epitomizes this crisis. Today, there is broad intellectual consensus that the international system is entering a more volatile phase, where states increasingly rely on coercive power, acting unilaterally or in narrow coalitions, while feeling less bound by normative constraints and multilateral institutional frameworks (Callamard, 2024; The Economist, 2024; Foy, 2024).

Within this broader context, Azerbaijan stands out as an interesting case study that demonstrates how a relatively small state successfully navigates through a complex geopolitical

© Huseynov, Tabib, 2024.

environment, while asserting its agency in international affairs. Some authors have suggested that Russia's role as the regional hegemon in the South Caucasus ended with its war against Ukraine (Meister, 2024). While the Ukraine War undoubtedly distracted Russia and weakened its hand in the South Caucasus, as this article shows, the key driver of change in the regional status quo has been not an external factor, but Azerbaijan's assertive actions.

This article analyzes how Azerbaijan reacts and adapts to the regional and global recalibration of international relations to assert its agency and achieve its strategic objectives. While recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, official Baku's approach to ensuring its agency in international affairs may provide valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners interested in how states manage competing national interests in geopolitically complex regional settings.

1. Forging a New Regional Status Quo

Azerbaijan's foreign policy doctrine has commonly been referred to as the "balanced foreign policy". (Kuchins, Mankoff & Backes, 2016; Strakes, 2013). Devised in the mid-1990s, this term was formally codified in the 2007 National Security Concept, which stipulated that "Azerbaijan pursues a multidimensional, balanced foreign policy" (National Security Concept, 2007: 1). This doctrine aimed to safeguard Azerbaijan's sovereignty and national interests – especially with regard to efforts to restore its territorial integrity – while avoiding antagonizing external powers. It proved to be highly effective in enabling the country to maintain constructive relationships with multiple actors, including Russia, the West,¹ Türkiye and Iran. In recent years, some authors and media also characterized Baku's foreign policy as "multi-vector" or "independent", to indicate a qualitative upgrade from a "balanced" approach (Nasibov, 2024: 108). This paper argues that the concept of balanced foreign policy, as conceived in the mid-1990s and evolved until 2020 – including its more modern "multi-vector" iteration – no longer fully captures the essence and ambition of Azerbaijan's contemporary foreign policy approach. The term "independent", on the other hand, is too vague and lacks precise substantive qualifier needed to define Azerbaijan's current approach to regional and global realities.

Two critical developments marked Azerbaijan's transition towards a more assertive policy doctrine, which is referred to in this paper as the pursuit of strategic autonomy: the outcome of the 2020 war with Armenia and the 2023 one-day operation in Karabakh.

The 2020 Second Karabakh War resulted in Azerbaijan's decisive military victory over Armenia and the de-occupation of most of its territories. It effectively ended the longstanding regional status quo predicated on maintaining a balance of power between these two nations. This balance, primarily enforced by Russia and supported by most other external actors, sought to prevent either side from achieving military superiority, which was viewed as a trigger for "unfreezing" of the conflict (Markedonov, 2018). It was feared that such an escalation would result in highly unpredictable consequences, including a potential spillover scenario that might draw in Russia, as Armenia's ally, and NATO member Türkiye, as Azerbaijan's ally, thereby destabilizing the wider region (ICG, 2017: 3). This equilibrium perpetuated the "neither peace, nor war" dynamic, while also granting Russia significant "divide and rule" leverage over both countries.

¹ Throughout this paper, the term "West" is used as a shorthand to refer collectively to the United States, Western Europe, the European Union, and its member states. While this generalization is commonly accepted, the author would like to acknowledge that the West is not a monolithic entity and that its members often have diverse and differing perspectives on a wide variety of issues.

Azerbaijan's victory in the 2020 war defied the pre-existing skeptical assessments of its ability to dislodge Armenian forces from its occupied territories. As an Azerbaijani scholar observed, this victory "came as a massive surprise to many" (Shafiyev, 2024a). The scale of Armenia's military defeat has made it highly unlikely that Armenia will regain military parity with Azerbaijan in the near future, despite ongoing efforts to re-arm with support from countries like France, India and allegedly, Iran (Huseynov, 2024a). Moreover, as Baku has repeatedly warned, Armenia's attempts to achieve such parity while delaying a peace agreement could force Azerbaijan's hand into taking preemptive escalatory measures, further jeopardizing Armenia's security (Chiragov, 2024). In this context, Azerbaijan has effectively replaced the notion of military parity with Armenia as a constraint imposed on it by external powers with a strategic lever of its own based on military superiority over Armenia. In doing so, Azerbaijan effectively linked considerations of Armenia's future security with progress in the bilateral peace process.

Azerbaijan further consolidated its status as a regional power following the one-day operation in Karabakh in September 2023. With this operation, it effectively ended institutionalized separatism within its borders and achieved the removal of the Russian peacekeeping contingent shortly thereafter, without angering Moscow, "something thought to be impossible in the post-Soviet space," as a Russian analyst admitted (Krivosheev, 2024). For the first time since gaining independence, Azerbaijan achieved full territorial control (excluding a few exclave villages still controlled by Armenia), marking a historic milestone in its statehood. This achievement not only restored Azerbaijan's territorial integrity but also eliminated its main vulnerability: the presence of a separatist entity within its borders, long viewed as a tool for external powers to constrain its sovereignty and keep it susceptible to foreign interference.

While a formal peace agreement with Armenia remains unsigned and the conflict technically unresolved, this is no longer considered a substantial constraint on Azerbaijan's foreign policy. On the contrary, as already mentioned, Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia and success in ending separatism within its borders – achieved not because of, but in spite of the challenging geopolitical circumstances – has allowed it to tie Armenia's long-term security to progress in the ongoing bilateral peace talks.

Today, there is a growing recognition that the South Caucasus is witnessing the emergence of a new regional order, one that is "more transactional and driven by the power of the strong" (Meister, 2024: 3). Azerbaijan sits at the center of this regional order. Unlike other neighboring countries, such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, which continue to grapple with similar challenges, Azerbaijan has become the first country to overcome both external aggression and internal separatism on its own terms. In doing so, it has achieved an agency it never enjoyed before and positioned itself as an indispensable power at the crossroads of Eurasian communication corridors, east-west and north-south.

2. The Contours of Azerbaijan's Policy of Strategic Autonomy

With the restoration of its territorial integrity and sovereignty, Azerbaijan's foreign policy has outgrown the previous balanced foreign policy doctrine. Now, a new terminology and conceptualization are warranted to more precisely reflect the shifts in Azerbaijan's foreign policy posture and conduct.

The policy of strategic autonomy best describes Azerbaijan's new, more confident and assertive posture. The transition to strategic autonomy is evolutionary, as it builds and expands upon the earlier balanced approach. Although this term has not yet been formalized in Baku's official normative acts or political discourse, nor thoroughly examined in the scholarly literature on Azerbaijan's foreign policy, the qualitative shift it encapsulates is increasingly recognized by scholars and policy experts both within the country and beyond. One manifestation of this recognition is the growing trend – particularly since 2024 – to characterize Azerbaijan as a nation transitioning from a small regional state to an emerging middle power (Jafarova, 2020; Jafarova, 2024; Cutler, 2024). While these analyses reflect more of an aspirational vision than a tangible reality, they underscore a growing acknowledgment of the country's role and ambitions on the international stage.

At this point, it is useful to provide a brief overview of the concept. Strategic autonomy can be defined as “the ability to set one's own priorities and make one's own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through – in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone” (SWP, 2019: 5). As researchers point out, “the opposite of strategic autonomy is being a rule-taker subject to strategic decisions made by others” (SWP, 2019: 5).

The term appeared in the European Union's (EU) political discourse in the early 2010s. It gained traction as a shorthand for the EU's ambition to reduce reliance on the US security guarantees, particularly following Donald Trump's election as the US president in 2016, his isolationist posture and his demand that other NATO member-states “must pay more” (SWP, 2019: 17). The term has since become popular and has been used in the literature to describe the foreign policy doctrines of various emerging global powers, most notably Türkiye (Dalay & Keyman, 2021) and India (Donald, 2024).

This conceptual framework fits well with what Azerbaijan is now trying to achieve. The basic tenets of its emerging strategic autonomy policy are summarized below.

2.1. Avoid play if you have no say

This guiding principle emphasizes Azerbaijan's interest in active engagement with the international frameworks and alliances where it can exercise agency, influence outcomes, and avoid being relegated to the role of a “rule-taker”.

It is due to this principle that Azerbaijan, unlike other regional countries with similar historical experiences, like Georgia, Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine, does not seek to build its national security based on external guarantees from any geopolitical pole. Instead, it tries to preserve its freedom of action and avoid getting tangled in geopolitical rivalries. Azerbaijan does have an important military pact with Türkiye (the so-called “Shusha Declaration” of 15 June 2021) (Shusha Declaration, 2021), but it recognizes that this agreement, in and of itself, is not a sufficient guarantee against future potential encroachments by Russia, or even by Iran, thereby necessitating complementary policy measures *vis-à-vis* these countries.

Importantly, the principle “avoid play if you have no say” also implies that Azerbaijan fundamentally rejects the concept of spheres of influence – a notion that has long been peddled by Russia in relation to its immediate neighbors. Official Baku has consistently asserted that it has no interest in aligning with one geopolitical pole against another. President Ilham Aliyev reiterated this position in his February 2024 swearing-in speech, declaring, “We are against any dividing lines” (President.az, 2024a).

2.2. Regional solutions for regional problems

This guiding principle essentially evolves from the first one. As the name suggests, this approach advocates for resolving local disputes by the countries of the region, rather than by “faraway powers” (Huseynov, 2024b: 78).

The concept of “regional solutions for regional problems” is not new; it was first proposed by Türkiye in the wake of Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia (Turkey, 2018: 60). However, it has only recently become an internalized policy principle for Baku.

Baku’s embrace of the “regional solutions for regional problems” principle largely stems from its frustration with what it perceives as anti-Azerbaijani bias and double standards in Western approaches to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, particularly exemplified by France under President Macron, as well as by other senior European and American politicians. Interestingly, in pursuing this policy discourse, Baku also finds itself aligned with Russia’s similar narrative. Moscow has frequently expressed rhetorical support for the “regional solutions for regional problems” principle in various contexts, including in the South Caucasus, viewing it as a useful narrative tool, which allows it to relate to various non-Western countries and draw on existing anti-Western sentiments.

Some of the key manifestations of this principle in Azerbaijan’s policy conduct are outlined below.

Insistence on direct bilateral talks with Armenia

Azerbaijan has rejected third-party conflict mediation since 2023, preferring direct bilateral talks with Armenia. While officials have expressed openness to facilitation by neutral parties, they firmly opposed formal mediation. Hikmat Hajiyev, foreign policy aide to President Aliyev, summarized this position in a recent statement: “Baku and Yerevan are conducting [direct] peace negotiations, and there is no need for a third party’s involvement. On the contrary, the interference of third parties in the region’s affairs hinders the normalization of relations” (Caspian News, 2024).

It’s worth noting that direct bilateral talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan – despite their recent history – have been quite productive so far. Thus, in May 2024, the sides independently agreed on the delimitation of small segments of their bilateral border. In October 2024, they signed a bilateral protocol that sets the legal and procedural framework for the subsequent border delimitation process. Notably, this protocol was the first legal document to be signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan ever since they regained independence in 1991. As of mid-December 2024, the two countries have agreed on 15 out of 17 articles of the peace treaty. This progress shows that Azerbaijan’s preference for direct bilateral negotiations with Armenia reflects not an erratic behavior but a strategic calculation.

Reliance on new (non-Western) multilateral formats

Another key manifestation of “regional solutions for regional problems” principle is Azerbaijan’s preference for various regional formats, which allows it to participate on an equal footing with other members, and thus act as a “rule-maker”, rather than a “rule-taker” (to borrow SWP’s terminology). This preference is reflected in Baku’s active participation in formats such as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), the 3+3 regional cooperation platform, and the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM). By participating in these platforms, Azerbaijan seeks to establish itself as a power broker, capable of shaping the regional and international agenda.

In his swearing-in speech in February 2024, President Ilham Aliyev famously said “[the OTS] is the main international organization for us, because it is our family. We have no other family. Our family is the Turkic world” (President.az, 2024a). This statement crystallized what Azerbaijani pundits referred to as a “pivot towards Central Asia”, in which Azerbaijan aims to position itself as a bridge connecting this region to the world (Huseynov & Mammadova, 2024).

Azerbaijan joined NAM in 2011, initially driven by desire to attain an “auxiliary platform” to draw international attention to the unresolved Karabakh conflict (Strakes, 2013: 49). Baku assumed chairmanship of NAM in 2019-2023, which coincided with the country’s transformation to a more powerful and ambitious international actor. Partly in response to its estrangement from Europe, Baku used its chairmanship to position itself as a vocal advocate of the Global South and a critic of Western neocolonial practices, particularly those of France, given tense bilateral relations. To solidify its newly gained credentials, Baku went beyond the rhetoric, providing humanitarian, economic, and technical assistance worth \$330 million to over 140 nations between 2020 and 2024 (MFA.gov.az, 2024), despite having recently emerged from a war that left large swaths of its territory devastated. In a sense, NAM served as an international platform for the Aliyev government to express its frustration with the West’s perceived double standards, while also engaging with the broader international community to project influence on a global stage.

The “3+3” platform, proposed by the Turkish President Erdogan in December 2020, shortly after the end of the Second Karabakh War, is the least institutionalized framework that Azerbaijan nevertheless has shown significant interest in. Baku views this format – proposed to include three regional countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) and three neighboring powers (Russia, Türkiye and Iran) – as a potentially promising mechanism for strengthening regional stability and cooperation. It regards this format as an opportunity to engage with Russia and Iran – its main geopolitical frenemies – on regional matters on an equal footing, with Türkiye’s backing. However, “3+3” has not been fully operational, due to Georgia’s reservations about joining such a format, which includes Russia and excludes the US/EU. Given that Armenia has also viewed this format with caution and skepticism, its potential remains unrealized and its future uncertain.

2.3. A regional gatekeeper, geopolitical interconnector and transit hub

The third guiding principle envisages Azerbaijan assuming a role of a regional gatekeeper, a geopolitical interconnector and a transit hub. This principle has the oldest roots in Azerbaijan’s foreign policy thinking. In a post-2020 era, however, this principle has taken on new colors, reflecting Azerbaijan’s increased regional influence and more assertive posture.

Since the early years of its independence, Azerbaijan relied on its strategic location and energy resources to attract foreign investments and international attention to its problems, as well as to diversify its partnerships in an effort to avoid becoming overly dependent on any single external actor. Since the mid-2000s, Azerbaijan has served as an important alternative source for supply of oil and gas to the European markets, bypassing Russia. As of 2024, Azerbaijan was the fourth-largest supplier of piped gas to the EU, just behind Norway, Algeria and Russia (Zabanova, 2024). In 2022, Baku signed with the EU a memorandum on a strategic partnership in the field of energy, in which Azerbaijan pledged to more than double its gas supplies to Europe to 20 bcm annually by 2027. Given the EU’s plans to phase out Russian gas

imports, Azerbaijan's significance as both a supplier and a potential transit route for Central Asian gas exports to Europe has further increased.

While energy exports to Europe are important, a more significant factor that enhances Azerbaijan's geopolitical value and influence is its strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Central Asia and Middle East. This location makes Azerbaijan a key link in the two biggest land-based connectivity projects in the world today: the Middle Corridor, a trade route that seeks to connect Europe with China passing through Central Asia; and the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC), which seeks to connect India to Russia passing through Iran.

The strategic importance of these routes, and hence, Azerbaijan's value as a transit hub and a geopolitical interconnector, which plays a pivotal role in bridging regional divides, further increased in recent years. The Middle Corridor became viewed as the main land link between China and Europe, given the fact that following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, most European operators opted not to receive or send goods across Russian territory. The shutdown of the Suez Canal in March 2021 due to a container ship running aground and the Houthi attacks on (largely) Western ships in the Red Sea since February 2024 further highlighted the growing strategic significance and economic promise of the Middle Corridor. In a November 2023 report, the World Bank projected tripling of trade volume along the Middle Corridor by 2030 (World Bank, 2023: 7). At the same time, following the Western-imposed sanctions, Russia came to view the NSTC as a critical connectivity project to reduce the impact of these sanctions, diversify its trade flows and expand economic relations with India and other countries of the Global South.

In conditions of competition between the opposing geopolitical powers, smaller or non-hegemonic states can make decisions that are as significant as those of great powers, if they effectively use hedging strategies to take advantage of opportunities for cooperation with different power centers (Nasibov, 2024: 106). Azerbaijan's central position in the Middle Corridor and NSTC, coupled with its confident strategic autonomy policy, gives it the opportunity to build constructive, mutually beneficial, and even strategic relations with opposing geopolitical powers, while avoiding negative repercussions of their competition. As an Azerbaijani scholar observed, "the crosscutting of these two corridors in Azerbaijan is now beneficial to all sides involved. Everyone needs Azerbaijan, and Baku knows it" (Nasibov, 2024: 114).

In his speeches and interviews in recent years, President Aliyev has on multiple occasions referred to the "factor of power" or "coercive power" ("*güc amili*" in Azerbaijani), as a defining feature of the contemporary international system. Thus, speaking at a joint press conference with Turkish President Erdogan in Baku in June 2023, Aliyev said: "In today's world, the factor of power takes precedence. Unfortunately, international law does not function. We saw this during the 30 years of occupation, when the discussions and negotiations yielded no results. It was our strength that [eventually] led to the results" (President.az, 2023). In a more recent December 2024 interview, Aliyev reiterated this message: "The factor of power is once again taking center stage in political aspirations. And those countries that recognized this sooner rather than later are likely to feel safer today" (President.az, 2024b).

This highly pragmatic, state- and power-centric rhetoric, which some may even view as verging on cynicism, is a key characteristic of Azerbaijan's foreign policy discourse today. As it becomes evident from the analysis, Azerbaijan's emerging policy of strategic autonomy is firmly anchored in realist and neorealist schools of thought, leaving little space for other more "progressive" IR theories in the mental predispositions of the policymakers. While Baku's

policy discourse often entertains topics such as Turkic unity, opposition to neocolonialism or collective action to combat climate change, its policy formulation is clearly “interest-driven”, determined by cold pragmatism and *realpolitik*, rather than “norm-driven”, based on liberal, idealist or constructivist thinking.

This policy thinking also distinguishes Azerbaijan from other regional states with similar historical experiences, such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. These states, unlike Azerbaijan, emphasize much more prominently liberal, idealist and constructivist norm-driven propositions – such as democracy, human rights, and European integration – in their political discourse as part of their efforts to align with the EU/NATO. As I explore further below, these fundamental differences in publicly articulated value systems, policy discourses, and the underlying theoretical frameworks used to formulate these policies create divergence and tension between a staunchly “realist” interest-driven Azerbaijan and a more norm-driven “liberal-constructivist” West. These underlying normative differences pose a significant – though not insurmountable – policy challenges for the future cooperation between Azerbaijan and the West.

3. Growing Divergence with the West

Azerbaijan presents a fascinating case study for policy analysts, scholars and journalists alike. Yet, of all the countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, it is arguably the least studied and understood – or perhaps even the most misunderstood – in the West. This analytical gap is particularly evident in the scholarly and media coverage of the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, which Azerbaijanis generally perceive as biased. A lack of nuanced understanding of the context and prevalent stereotyping reinforce misconceptions about Azerbaijan in the Western discourse. This also generates a backlash from Azerbaijan, which often is equally misinformed and counterproductive. Understanding the analytical gaps and communication pitfalls is crucial to preventing a vicious cycle that could undermine the strategic interests of both sides and potentially derail Azerbaijan ambitions for achieving strategic autonomy.

3.1. Azerbaijan as a blind spot in a Eurocentric outlook

Two main factors have relegated Azerbaijan to the margins of the Eurocentric scholarly and media attention and unwittingly contributed to the perpetuation of biased attitudes.

First, as pointed out above, unlike Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, Azerbaijan did not operate within the ideological and discursive frames centered around European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The peak of Azerbaijan’s enthusiasm for the integration with the EU/NATO was in 2007, when it adopted a National Security Concept, proclaiming “integration with European and Euro-Atlantic structures” as the second most important policy priority after the restoration of territorial integrity (National Security Concept, 2007: 1). That enthusiasm quickly evaporated following the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia, as Azerbaijan became convinced that it could not rely on the West for its long-term security (Shiriyev, 2019: 10).

Second, Azerbaijan’s authoritarian governance model fundamentally diverges from the liberal democracy in the West. Leadership in Baku often argues – not without a degree of cunning – that the choice of the governance model that prioritizes control and order over liberal democracy is dictated by the country’s unique geopolitical circumstances and challenges. Coupled with its Muslim background, Azerbaijan’s governance practices create a sense of cultural remoteness among the European/Western policymakers, scholars and journalists.

This, in turn, gives rise to the perception of double standards, reinforcing the belief among the Azerbaijani public that the West's ambivalence and lack of support is a reflection of its hypocrisy, or even neo-orientalist Islamophobic and Turkophobic bias (Shafiyev, 2022).

In June 2024, President Aliyev declared unapologetically, "We are not Europe. We do not want to join the European family" (President.az, 2024c). This statement was as much a manifestation of Baku's fixation on its strategic autonomy as it was a culmination of its frustration and disillusionment with the West.

3.2. Double standards and the securitization of human rights in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan's pursuit of strategic autonomy, its emphasis on self-reliance and skepticism toward European and Euro-Atlantic institutions have been largely shaped by years of frustration over the perceived indifference of external powers towards its plight in the Karabakh conflict.

Azerbaijanis often complain about the double standards in the way the EU and US policy makers and media treated the conflict in Azerbaijan, compared to other similar conflicts in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. While the separatist leaders in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and Donbass were diplomatically isolated, the Karabakh Armenian leadership received international delegations and was itself hosted – albeit unofficially – in the US and European capitals. While the businesses and individuals affiliated with the separatist entities in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia faced sanctions, the US and European governments largely turned a blind eye to the businesses – predominantly from the Armenian Diaspora – operating in Azerbaijan's occupied territories.

The West's long-standing indifference to Azerbaijan's plight over Karabakh shifted to sharp criticism following the victory in the 2020 war. This criticism intensified further after Azerbaijan's one-day operation in September 2023, which dismantled the separatist entity on its territory and subsequently triggered a non-violent exodus of ethnic Armenians from Karabakh. In November 2020, just days after the war ended, the French Senate adopted a non-binding resolution calling for the recognition of the separatist NKR. This resolution, timed at the most inadequate moment and disconnected from the realities on the ground, came to symbolize the misinformed, conflict-insensitive and biased attitudes towards Azerbaijan. Since then, several parliamentary resolutions criticizing Azerbaijan's actions have been adopted by France, and with its diplomatic encouragement, by the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and the European Parliament. These resolutions had no meaningful effect and only contributed to heightening the negative and emotionally charged political climate between the West and Azerbaijan, as well as between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which raises questions about the true underlying objectives of such resolutions. These emotional grievances – coupled with the broader global trend of disillusionment with the West – have diminished the enthusiasm of both the Azerbaijani ruling elites and the public for closer European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Several resolutions adopted in recent years by the European Parliament bundled criticism of Azerbaijan's democracy and human rights record with support for pro-Armenian narratives. Thus, for example, these resolutions merged the issue of Azerbaijani journalists and human rights activists believed to be arrested on politically motivated grounds with separatist leaders captured in 2023, who await trial for alleged war crimes.

This linkage, while perhaps unintended, has been highly damaging and counterproductive by creating a perception in Azerbaijan that human rights are being weaponized against it. Consequently, these resolutions have inadvertently provided the Azerbaijani government with

a powerful narrative tool to muzzle dissenting voices under the pretext of safeguarding national unity against foreign machinations. This situation weakens the EU's and the US' credibility in Azerbaijan and undermines their ability to engage meaningfully and constructively on issues of governance reforms and human rights. It also complicates communication on broader geopolitical issues, where interests align.

4. Azerbaijan's Strategic Autonomy and the Future Security Architecture

Azerbaijan's quest for strategic autonomy will not be a smooth process. Its rising influence and assertion of agency will naturally create frictions with its regional rivals and external powers seeking to exert greater control. Still, achieving this objective holds the promise of transforming the entire South Caucasus region, from a net consumer to a net provider of security within the broader European and Eurasian security framework.

4.1. Main risks to Azerbaijan's pursuit of strategic autonomy

There are two main geopolitical risks that may derail Azerbaijan's pursuit of strategic autonomy: first, the outcome of the war in Ukraine; and second, the future trajectory of Azerbaijan-West relations.

A Russian military victory over Ukraine would not only pose an existential threat to the Ukrainian statehood but would also embolden Moscow to engage in further aggressive actions towards other countries in its neighborhood. In such a scenario, Azerbaijan, with its independent geopolitical ambitions, could become a prime target. The Kremlin likely holds grudges against Baku for outmaneuvering it during the 2020 war and again during the 2023 operation, leaving Russia with no choice but to resign to the new regional status quo forged by Azerbaijan. If Ukraine loses and Russia wins, Baku will face a heightened risk of being coerced – whether through military means or more subtle forms of pressure – into abandoning its strategic autonomy and agreeing to Moscow's geopolitical subjugation.

The second risk to Azerbaijan's pursuit of strategic autonomy lies in its growing divergence with the West, as discussed earlier. If the gap between the two continues to widen, existing issues – such as the US and European criticism of Azerbaijan's democracy and human rights, along with personality clashes between the leaders, as seen between Presidents Aliyev and Macron – could evolve into deeper, more entrenched hostility on both sides. This is where Azerbaijani leadership's heavily realist and neo-realist mindset falls short of analytical power to appreciate the importance of idealist values and normative-constructivist approaches in forging long-term strategic partnerships, as opposed to transactional ones.

A deterioration in relations would serve neither Azerbaijan's nor Europe's strategic interests. It would drive Azerbaijan closer towards Russia and other powers, like China, restricting its freedom of action and undermining its pursuit of strategic autonomy. For Europe and the West in general, such deterioration would mean losing a key partner in energy and trade, as well as a key regional player capable of keeping Russian and Iranian influences in the South Caucasus in check, while maintaining pragmatic engagement with both.

4.2. Azerbaijan as a geopolitical interconnector

To mitigate the risk of mutual estrangement, both Azerbaijan and the West must engage in dialogue, emphasizing pragmatic cooperation. For Azerbaijan, this requires moving

beyond often emotionally charged reactions to Western criticisms and engaging with the policymakers, scholarly and journalistic circles in Europe, the US and elsewhere in ways that are more proactive and open to constructive criticism. For Western policymakers, this implies adopting a better-informed approach to Azerbaijan – one that recognizes its past conflict-related sensitivities, supports its agency and preserves a genuine concern for human rights, without instrumentalizing it for narrow political agendas.

Policy initiatives that capitalize on Azerbaijan's role as a geopolitical interconnector can strengthen Azerbaijan's relations with the West, while also contributing to regional stability. For example, between 2017 and 2019, Baku hosted high-level military discussions between the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his Russian counterpart, as well as between NATO and Russia military leaders, aimed at reducing tensions and preventing incidents between them. At the time, Azerbaijan's hosting of these discussions was praised, with some referring to Baku as a "Caucasian Geneva" (Kucera, 2017) and a "perfect venue" for talking to Russia (Euractiv, 2018). Against the backdrop of escalating tensions over Ukraine, and considering the re-election of Donald Trump as US President and his stated interest in nuclear deconfliction, renewing this dialogue format in Azerbaijan could contribute to avoiding unintended incidents between Russia and NATO that neither side is interested in.

Azerbaijan could also serve as a useful platform for deconfliction and dialogue between Türkiye and Israel, its two closest allies, which have found themselves increasingly at loggerheads in the Middle East over Türkiye's harsh criticism of Israeli actions in Gaza. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria created a power vacuum and brought Türkiye and Israel into direct proximity, raising speculations of a potential direct confrontation between the two. This scenario would be highly undesirable for Azerbaijan, as it would force the country into a difficult position of having to choose sides. There are indications that Baku is already acting behind the scenes to ease tensions. Thus, Hikmat Hajiyev, foreign policy aide to President Aliyev visited Israel in early December 2024 to hold talks with the country's president and foreign minister and offer Baku's good offices (Turkish Minute, 2024).

These examples demonstrate Azerbaijan's potential as a "geopolitical interconnector", which can be characterized as a non-aligned country at the intersection of multiple geopolitical rivalries that uses its strategic position and diplomatic engagements to stay out of geopolitical entanglements, take advantage of opportunities for cooperation with different power centers, and when possible, acts as a bridge to mend ties between the opposing powers, all while enhancing its own agency.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan's more confident and assertive foreign policy, which was conceived in 2020 and began to take shape in 2023, is still nascent in terms of its conceptualization and realization. While a widely accepted name for this emerging doctrine is yet to be established, this paper has attempted to conceptualize its basic tenets under the theoretical framework of strategic autonomy.

Azerbaijan's quest for strategic autonomy reflects its desire to assert its sovereignty and avoid being drawn into geopolitical alignments that could undermine its agency. It also manifests in Azerbaijan's ambition to position itself as an emerging middle power, who engages in non-hierarchical relations with different centers of gravity, be it the West, Russia, China, or secondary powers, such as Türkiye, Iran and Israel. As the paper shows, Azerbaijan's

approach stands in stark contrast to that of other regional countries with similar historical experiences and geopolitical challenges, such as Georgia, Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine. Unlike these nations, Azerbaijan prioritizes self-reliance over external security guarantees, and realpolitik pragmatism over Eurocentric moral idealism.

Another distinctive feature of Azerbaijan's new foreign policy approach is what I term a "geopolitical interconnector". This paper describes the concept as one of the main manifestations of Azerbaijan's pursuit of strategic autonomy, whereby it leverages its strategic location and capacity for engagement without geopolitical entanglement, in order to serve as a bridge (or interconnector) between opposing powers, while enhancing its own agency in the process.

Being the first article to address Azerbaijan's newly evolving foreign policy doctrine through the theoretical framework of strategic autonomy, this study necessitates further research. Such research should be informed by a broader range of empirical data and observations gathered over a longer period, to better understand the trajectories, assess the effectiveness and evaluate the potential outcomes of this evolving doctrine. As Azerbaijan continues its quest for strategic autonomy, its foreign policy pursuits are likely going to draw considerable attention from scholars and practitioners alike, contributing to the global body of knowledge on how states pursue strategic autonomy in a multipolar world.

References

- Callamard, Agnès (2024) Gaza and the end of the rules-based order. *Foreign Affairs*. February 15. Available online: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/gaza-and-end-rules-based-order>
- Caspian News (2024) Azerbaijan Says No Need for Mediator in Peace Talks with Armenia. December 14. Available online: <https://www.caspiannews.com/news-detail/azerbaijan-says-no-need-for-mediator-in-peace-talks-with-armenia-2024-12-12-33/>
- Chiragov, Fuad (2024) Armenia's Military Build-up Might Push Azerbaijan to a 'Pre-emptive War'. *TRT World*. 8 October. Available online: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/armenias-military-build-up-might-push-azerbaijan-to-a-preemptive-war-18221923>
- Cutler, Robert M. (2024) Azerbaijan's Emergence as Middle Power. *Liberum*. September 12. Available online: <https://theliberum.com/azerbaijans-emergence-as-a-middle-power/>
- Dalay, Galip and Keyman, Fuat (2021) Has Turkey's Quest for "Strategic Autonomy" Run its Course? *GMF*. July 26. Available online: <https://www.gmfus.org/news/has-turkeys-quest-strategic-autonomy-run-its-course>
- Donald, Davide (2024) India Between Superpowers: Strategic Autonomy in the Shadow of a Pacific Conflict. *CFR*. December 16. Available online: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/india-between-superpowers-strategic-autonomy-shadow-pacific-conflict>
- Euractiv (2018) NATO: Baku is "Perfect Venue" for Talking to Russia. December 17. Available online: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/nato-baku-is-perfect-venue-for-talking-to-russia/>
- Foy, Henry (2024) Rush by West to Back Israel Erodes Developing Countries' Support for Ukraine. *Financial Times*. 18 October. Available online: <https://www.ft.com/content/e0b43918-7eaf-4a11-baaf-d6d7fb61a8a5>

- Huseynov, Vasif (2024a) Military Supplies to Armenia Escalate Tensions in South Caucasus. *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. August 6. Available online: <https://jamestown.org/program/military-supplies-to-armenia-escalate-tensions-in-south-caucasus/>
- Huseynov, Vasif (2024b) Revitalizing the 3+3 Platform: A Formula for a New Regional Security Order? *Baku Dialogues*. January 30, 7(2): 72-82. https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/media/2024/01/30/bd-w23-24_huseynov.pdf
- Huseynov, Rusif and Gulkhanim Mammadova (2024) Azerbaijan's Pivot to Central Asia. Commentary. RUSI. 8 April. Available online: <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/azerbajians-pivot-central-asia>
- International Crisis Group (2017) Nagorno-Karabakh's Gathering War Clouds. *Crisis Group Europe Report*, 244. 1 June. Available online: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/244-nagorno-karabakhs-gathering-war-clouds.pdf>
- Jafarova, Esmira (2020) Is Azerbaijan a Middle Power? *Modern Diplomacy*. May 16. Available online: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/05/16/is-azerbaijan-a-middle-power/>
- Jafarova, Esmira (2024) Is Azerbaijan a Middle Power? *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives*. 11–29. Available online: [https://cspjournal.az/uploads/files/CSP%20Middle%20Power\(2\)%20Esmira%20Jafarova_S24.pdf](https://cspjournal.az/uploads/files/CSP%20Middle%20Power(2)%20Esmira%20Jafarova_S24.pdf)
- Krivoshchev, Kirill (2024) The Cost of Russia's Friendship with Azerbaijan. *Carnegie Politika*. May 7. Available online: <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/05/the-cost-of-russias-friendship-with-azerbaijan>
- Kucera, Joshua (2017) With Russia-NATO Meeting, is Baku the New Caucasian Geneva? *Eurasianet*. September 8. Available online: <https://eurasianet.org/with-russia-nato-meeting-is-baku-the-new-caucasian-geneva>
- Kuchins, Andrew C., Mankoff, Jeffrey, and Backes, Oliver (2016) Azerbaijan in a Reconnecting Eurasia: Foreign Economic and Security Interests. *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*. Available online: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/azerbaijan-reconnecting-eurasia>
- Markedonov, Sergey (2018) Russia and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: A Careful Balancing. *ISPI*. 12 March. Available online: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/russia-and-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-careful-balancing-19832>
- MFA.gov.az (2024) Speech of Minister of Foreign Affairs Jeyhun Bayramov in the General Debate of the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. September 28. Available online: <https://mfa.gov.az/en/news/no39324>
- Meister, Stefan (2024) The End of Russian Hegemony: A New Transactional Order Arises in the South Caucasus. *German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)*. December. Available online: https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/DGAP_Analyse_2023_EN-02-End-of-Russian-Hegemony_WEB_SinglePages%20%281%29.pdf
- Nasibov, Murad (2024) Central Asia and South Caucasus in an Era of New Great Power Rivalry. *Baku Dialogues*, 7(4): 106-114. <https://bakudialogues.ada.edu.az/articles/hedging-foreign-policies-07-08-2024>
- National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2007) Available online: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/154917/Azerbaijan2007.pdf>
- President.az (2023) Joint press statements of Presidents of Azerbaijan and Türkiye (in Azerbaijani). June 13. Available online: <https://president.az/az/articles/view/60314/>
- President.az (2024a) Official transcript of the speech made by Ilham Aliyev at the swearing-in ceremony. February 14. Available online: <https://president.az/en/articles/view/63979>

- President.az (2024b) Official transcript of Ilham Aliyev's interview (in Russian). December 18. Available online: <https://president.az/ru/articles/view/67537>
- President.az (2024c) Ilham Aliyev received TURKPA delegation (official transcript). Available online: <https://president.az/az/articles/view/66200>
- Shafiyev, Farid (2022) The Orientalizing of Azerbaijanis and the Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict. *The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Historical and Political Perspectives*. Routledge, 88–111. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003261209-6>
- Shafiyev, Farid (2024a) Why So Many Experts Are Wrong: Ideological Self-Confinement. *Liberum*. 19 August. Available online: <https://theliberum.com/why-so-many-experts-are-wrong-ideological-self-confinement/>
- Shiriyev, Zaur (2019) Azerbaijan's Relations with Russia: Closer by Default? *Chatham House*. March. Available online: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-03-14-Azerbaijan2.pdf>
- Shusha Declaration (2021) 15 June 2021. Available online: <https://aze.media/the-full-text-of-the-shusha-declaration/>
- Strakes, Jason E. (2013) Situating the “Balanced Foreign Policy”: The Role of System Structure in Azerbaijan's Multi-Vector Diplomacy. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 15(1): 37-67. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2013.766085>
- SWP (2019) European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts and Interests. doi:10.18449/2019RP04 Turkey: Towards a Eurasian Shift? (2018) Edited by Valeria Talbot. *ISPI*. April. Available online: https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/turkey_report_.pdf
- The Economist (2024) The World's Rules-based Order is Cracking. 9 May. Available online: <https://www.economist.com/international/2024/05/09/the-worlds-rules-based-order-is-cracking>
- Turkish Minute (2024) Azerbaijan Quietly Mediates Between Turkey and Israel: Reports. December 11. Available online: <https://www.turkishminute.com/2024/12/11/baku-quietly-mediates-between-turkey-and-israel-reports/>
- World Bank (2023) Middle Trade and Transport Corridor. Available online: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/7e6a216e-eb56-4783-ba1b-b7621abddcd9/content>
- Zabanova, Yana (2024) The EU and Azerbaijan as Energy Partners: Short-term Benefits, Uncertain Future. *Heinrich Boell Stiftung*. November 5. Available online: <https://www.boell.de/en/2024/11/05/eu-and-azerbaijan-energy-partners-short-term-benefits-uncertain-future>